DVD ROM

PLAY

GUITAR HERO 2

PLUS: NEED FOR SPEED CARBON · A TON OF VIDEOS · & MORE!

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OFFICIAL U.S. PlayStation MAGAZINE

PS3 WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

OBLIVION

SECRET RPG LAUNCH TITLE CONFIRMED!

12-PAGE

Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine Issue 110 (November 2006)

DIVINE CRUSADER!

WORLD-EXCLUSIVE REVEAL!

OBLIVION PSP

FINALLY, AN RPG
WORTH HOLDING ON TO

EYE POPPING
PS3 EXCLUSIVE

RIDGE RACER 7

NAMCO COMES THROUGH AGAIN
FIRST HANDS-ON AND PICS!

SPECIAL FEATURE

EAST VS. WEST

ARE AMERICAN RPGS BETTER?

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Dirt God Commandments

Thou shall race all offroading vehicles:
ATVs, bikes, buggies and trophy trucks.

Thou shall do sick freestyle tricks off jumps.

Thou shall not mud pants while getting big air.

Thou shall customize vehicle to make faster.

Thou shall race in all terrain: snow, dirt, sand,
forest and especially mud.

Thou shall not wash ATV unless thou washes it with mud.

Thou shall strive to become a pro racer.

Thou shall feed on adrenaline for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

**Thou shall honor all commandments
of the Dirt Gods or feel their wrath.**

ATV Offroad Fury® 4. Now race with MX bikes, buggies and trophy trucks on over 70 new tracks. Live the life of a rookie rider in Story Mode, and customize your own tracks with Track Editor. The Dirt Gods are pleased.

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Mild Lyrics
Mild Violence

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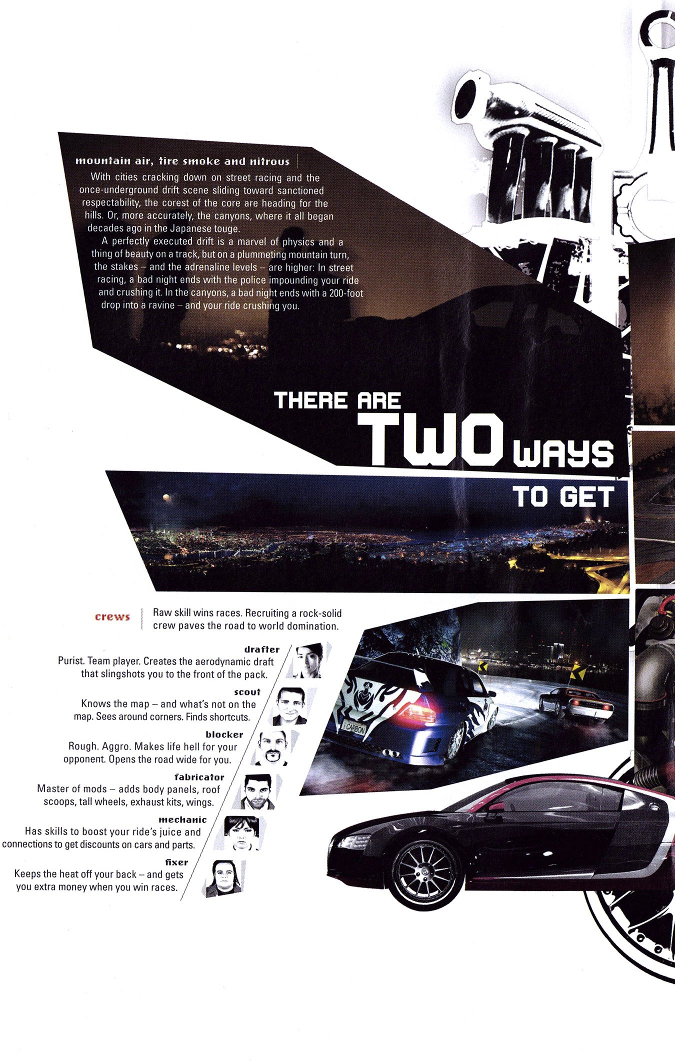
ATV Offroad Fury 4
BLAZE YOUR OWN TRAIL.
ONLINE
BROADBAND AND DIAL-UP
PlayStation 2
LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.



mountain air, tire smoke and nitrous

With cities cracking down on street racing and the once-underground drift scene sliding toward sanctioned respectability, the corest of the core are heading for the hills. Or, more accurately, the canyons, where it all began decades ago in the Japanese touge.

A perfectly executed drift is a marvel of physics and a thing of beauty on a track, but on a plummeting mountain turn, the stakes – and the adrenaline levels – are higher: In street racing, a bad night ends with the police impounding your ride and crushing it. In the canyons, a bad night ends with a 200-foot drop into a ravine – and your ride crushing you.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS TO GET

crews | Raw skill wins races. Recruiting a rock-solid crew paves the road to world domination.

drafter
Purist. Team player. Creates the aerodynamic draft that slingshots you to the front of the pack.

scout
Knows the map – and what's not on the map. Sees around corners. Finds shortcuts.

blocker
Rough. Aggro. Makes life hell for your opponent. Opens the road wide for you.

fabricator
Master of mods – adds body panels, roof scoops, tall wheels, exhaust kits, wings.

mechanic
Has skills to boost your ride's juice and connections to get discounts on cars and parts.

fixer
Keeps the heat off your back – and gets you extra money when you win races.

PLATFORM SPECIFICATIONS

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RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

TITLE
NEED FOR SPEED CARBON

FACTOID: 91,000 car paints in game

INFORMATION
www.nfscarbon.com

DEVELOPMENT START
01 | 03 | 05

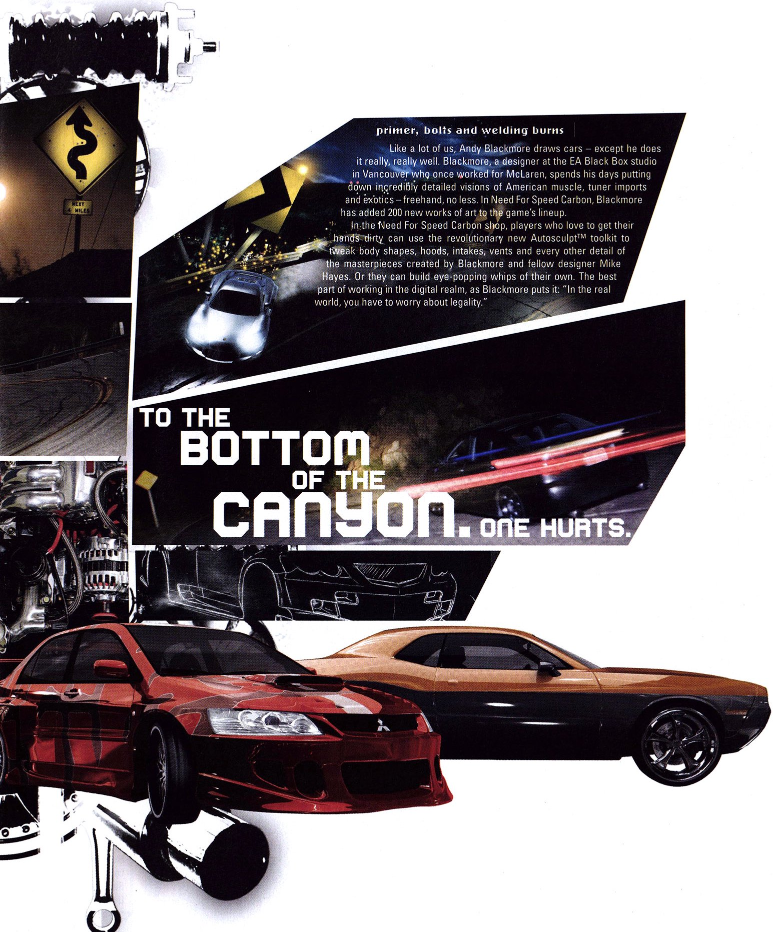
DATE OF RELEASE
11 | 01 | 06

TO THE BOTTOM OF THE CANYON. ONE HURTS.

primer, bolts and welding burns

Like a lot of us, Andy Blackmore draws cars – except he does it really, really well. Blackmore, a designer at the EA Black Box studio in Vancouver who once worked for McLaren, spends his days putting down incredibly detailed visions of American muscle, tuner imports and exotics – freehand, no less. In Need For Speed Carbon, Blackmore has added 200 new works of art to the game's lineup.

In the Need For Speed Carbon shop, players who love to get their hands dirty can use the revolutionary new Autosculpt™ toolkit to tweak body shapes, hoods, intakes, vents and every other detail of the masterpieces created by Blackmore and fellow designer Mike Hayes. Or they can build eye-popping whips of their own. The best part of working in the digital realm, as Blackmore puts it: "In the real world, you have to worry about legality."



"It's easily the best RPG to hit PSP, not to mention one of the best of the last two console generations."

(Game of the Month, 9 out of 10)

–PSM: Independent PlayStation Magazine, August 2006

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TEEN
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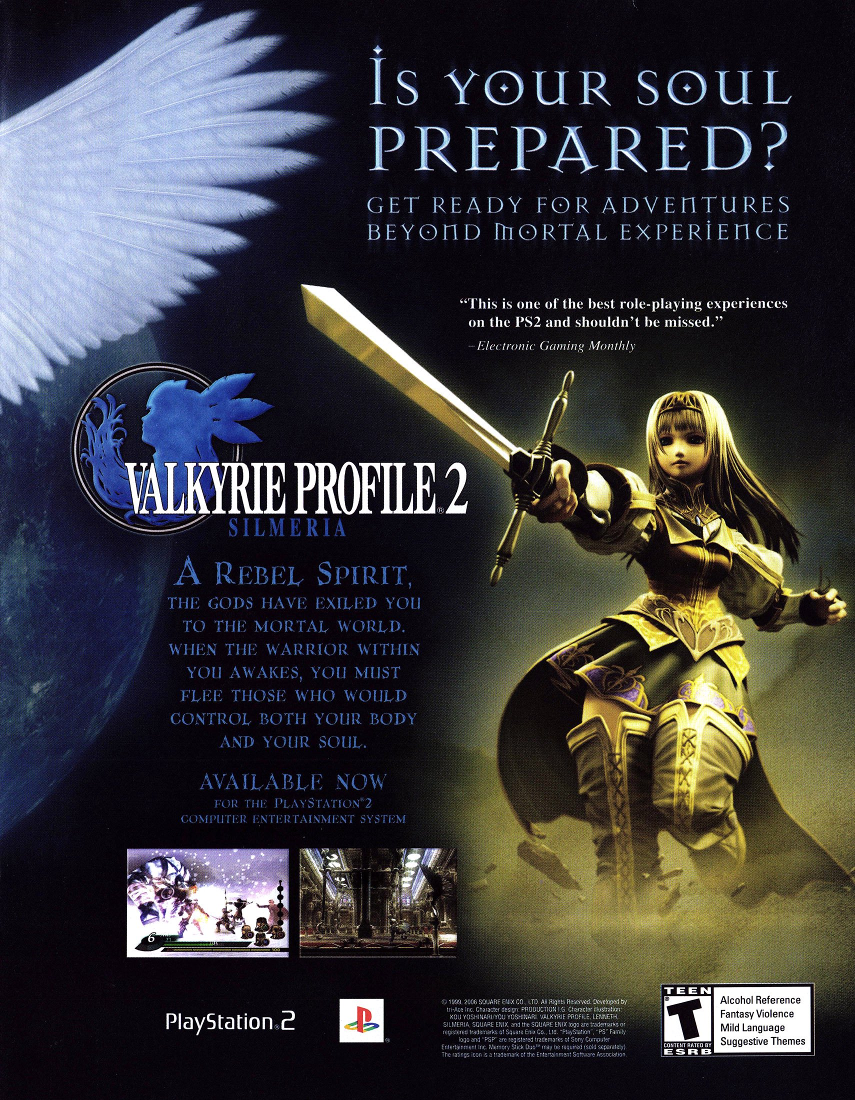
ESRB

Fantasy Violence
Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol



IS YOUR SOUL PREPARED?

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> **"This is one of the best role-playing experiences on the PS2 and shouldn't be missed."**
>
> –*Electronic Gaming Monthly*

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SILMERIA

A REBEL SPIRIT,
THE GODS HAVE EXILED YOU
TO THE MORTAL WORLD.
WHEN THE WARRIOR WITHIN
YOU AWAKES, YOU MUST
FLEE THOSE WHO WOULD
CONTROL BOTH YOUR BODY
AND YOUR SOUL.

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PlayStation®2

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TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY
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Alcohol Reference
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes

8
400TX
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400TX
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8A
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9A
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10A
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Tom Clancy's

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DOUBLE AGENT

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JUICE UP THE INTENSITY

Take on the world across 24 new multiplayer maps, with up to 32 PLAYERS ONLINE or up to 4 players in split-screen.

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Lead the charge as an Army Ranger, a British SAS officer and a Delta Troop Commander in 11 treacherous new missions through Iranian oil fields, South American jungles and more.

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Violence
Blood
Drug Reference
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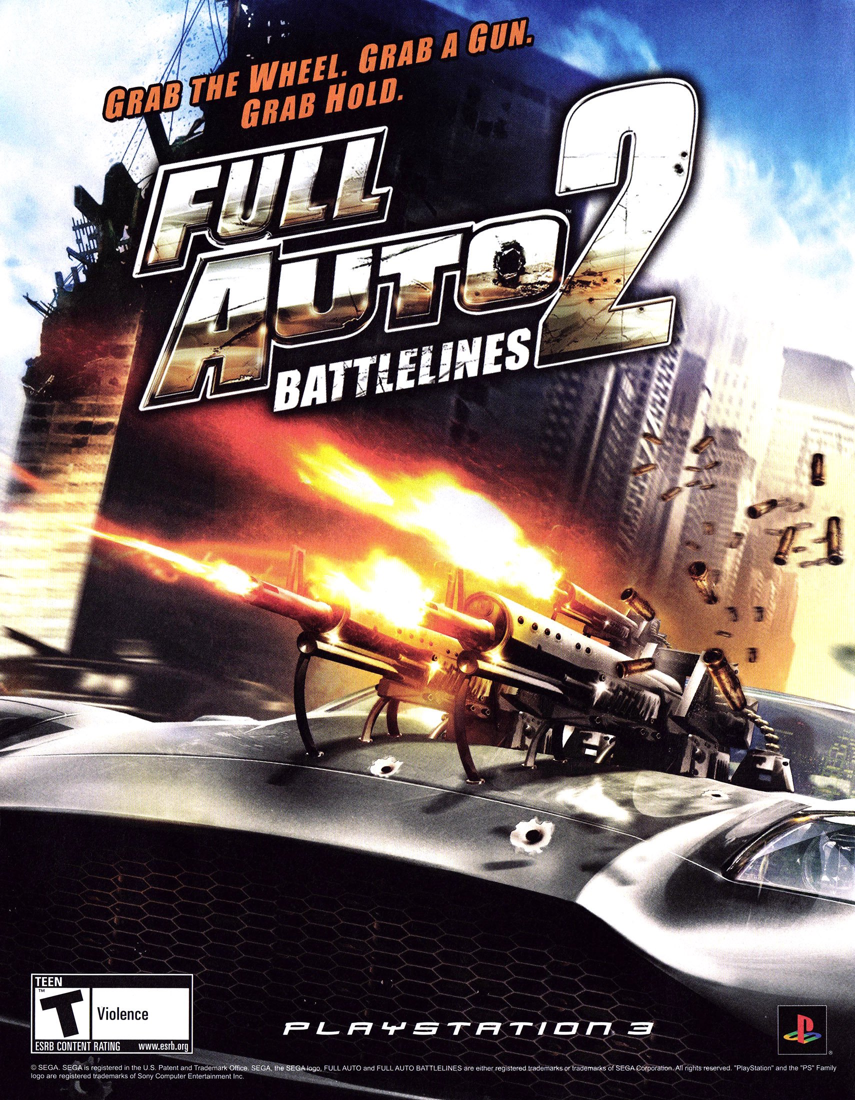
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GRAB HOLD.
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PLAYSTATION 3

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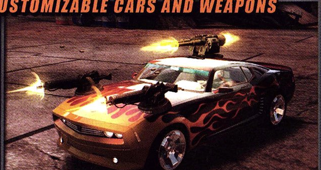
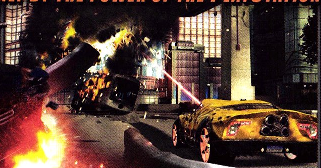
OBLITERATE AN ENTIRE CITY TO CHANGE THE COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE

ENGAGE IN FIERCE SINGLE-PLAYER AND DESTRUCTIVE MULTIPLAYER COMBAT

CHOOSE FROM A VARIETY OF CUSTOMIZABLE CARS AND WEAPONS



A NEW AGE OF CAR COMBAT, MADE POSSIBLE ONLY BY THE POWER OF THE PLAYSTATION®3



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OBLIVION

SECRET RPG LAUNCH TITLE CONFIRMED!

12 PAGE BLOW-OUT

ALL-NEW FACTION: BECOME THE DIVINE CRUSADER!

WORLD EXCLUSIVE REVEAL!

OBLIVION PSP

FINALLY, AN RPG WORTH HOLDING ONTO

COVER STORY

ISSUE

110

PAGE 64

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Talks about her first time....

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The PS3 cometh.

OPM.1UP.COM

Resistance will be futile when you see all the *Resistance: Fall of Man* coverage currently on 1UP, including features, videos, and a special *1UP Show* episode in which the gang visits the offices of *Resistance* developers Insomniac Games. Company head Ted Price hosts a tour of the House that Ratchet built, plus you'll see eye-popping *Resistance* gameplay video.

Also on 1UP, PS3 coverage is heating up to lava levels as we inch ever closer to the Big Day (November 17). Over 27 playable PS3 games were seen at the Tokyo Game Show, and 1UP got their hands on every single one.

GAMES
COVERED INSIDE

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122 Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07

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SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Violence

Game experience may change during online play.

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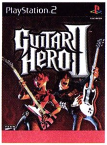
#110

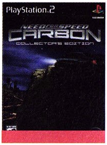
ISSUE 110
Official PlayStation Magazine
SONY

PLAY IT!



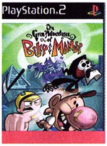
GUITAR HERO II

If you thought the first game made air guitar a thing of the past, then this highly anticipated sequel will bury your days of strumming the atmosphere for good.



NEED FOR SPEED CARBON

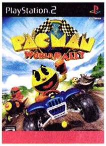
Choose your wheels, pimp out your ride, and see just what it takes to rule the streets in this latest iteration of *Need for Speed*.



THE GRIM ADVENTURES OF BILLY & MANDY

Sample Versus Mode with up to four friends in this game based on the Cartoon Network series of the same name.

WATCH IT!



PAC-MAN WORLD RALLY

Namco has joined the kart-racing craze with this entry showcasing the granddaddy of video games: Pac-Man! Check it out!

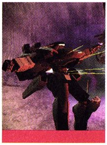
WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

One of the things we pride ourselves on is bringing you the latest and greatest demos the gaming world has to offer. That is one of the benefits of reading the *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*, which you are holding right here in your hands.

This month's disc lets you rock out to four songs from the upcoming *Guitar Hero II*, get behind the wheel in *Need for Speed Carbon*, or battle it out with *Billy & Mandy*. Our video showcase also explodes this month, too, with more than a half dozen games to wow you.

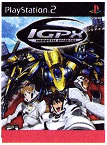
So, what are you waiting for? Grab the disc and get to your PlayStation 2!

WATCH IT!



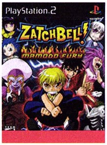
EUREKA SEVEN VOL. 1: THE NEW WAVE

See what it is like to take control of one of these sky surfing crazy ol' mechs in this combat-adventure game. It's like *Point Break* with robots!



IGPX: IMMORTAL GRAND PRIX

Here's more mech craziness for you with *IGPX: Immortal Grand Prix*, featuring customizable formations and high-speed battles.



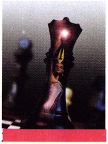
ZATCH BELL! MAMODO FURY

Fans of the anime series will enjoy this fighter featuring both four-player action (2-on-2 or battle royal) and single-player story mode.

.HACK//G.U. VOL. 1// REBIRTH

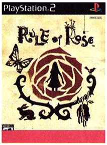
Check out the next installment in the *.hack* series, complete with new characters and an original story line set back in the world of The World.

WATCH IT!



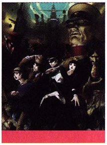
ONLINE CHESS KINGDOMS

Here's something that adds new twists to classic chess rules and let's you join teams in a persistent online world. The king of games rules.



RULE OF ROSE

Play by the rules set by a bunch of creepy girls to solve puzzles, fight enemies and attempt to free yourself from this madness. Unless you like living in insanity.



SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: DEVIL SUMMONER

Set in early 1900s Taishou-era Japan, play as a devil summoner and detective who can summon demons, then use their abilities to aid you.

INSIDE THE GAME

DESTROY ALL HUMANS! 2

Furon Scout Crypto 137 returns to Earth in this sequel.

LOCOROCO

Dive head-first into a colorful world where jelly-like creatures sing.

HIDDEN TREASURE

We could tell you what it is, but what would be the fun in that?

Correction: The sleeve mentions a demo for *Monster House*; however, this demo did not make it to the final disc.

PLAYSTATION UNDERGROUND TEAM

Demo Disc Producers
Gary Barth, Cori Lucas, Manuel Sousa, Chris Tan
Marketing Team
Steve Williams, Eric Lempel, Jesse Caid
Executive Producer
Peter Dille
QA
Sam Bradley, Edward Toomy
Account Coordinator
Justin Flores
Programming and interface artwork by
Lifelike Productions, Inc.
Lead Programmers William Bohan, Ron Midthun, Avery Lodato
3D Artists Jason Robinson, Philip Williamson, David Hayes
President Katherine Williams
Technical Director Tim Edwards

SPECIAL THANKS
Maimoona Block, Kirsten Costello, Christine DeNezza, Tom Gillan, Gerald Martin, Sean Thomas, Jim Williams

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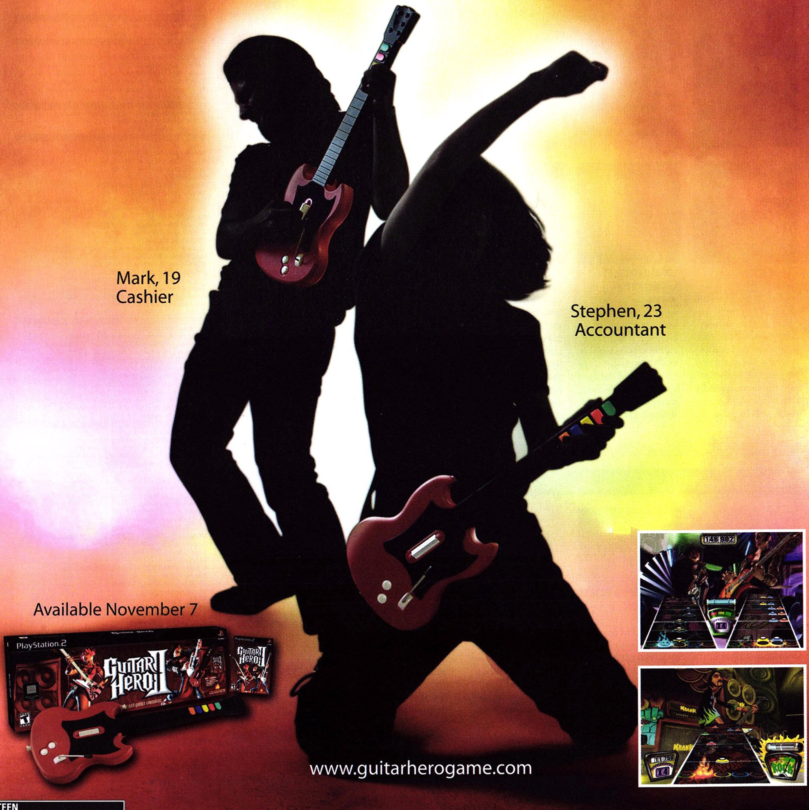

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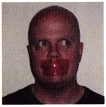
THE OPM FAMILY

TOM BYRON

realizes that the PlayStation community may be crying over PS3 shortages and delays, but he can only think "Hmm, no units in Europe until March, only 100,000 units in Japan and 400,000 in the U.S.?" W00t! Tom has always known America is #1 and Sony's finally admitting it! This is the biggest market and it's about time the good ol' U.S. of A. got its proper due. Tom also insists it's everyone's patriotic duty to read Joe's feature about an astounding RPG from an American developer, just a little game called *Oblivion*.

DANA JONGEWAARD

got inspired after playing with all of the clothing in *The Sims 2: Pets* and decided to try dressing up her real-life cat in a nice little outfit of hoodie and cowboy hat. However, her real-life cat had something to say about the plan. Stupid pets.



JOE RYBICKI

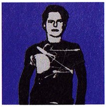
has been keeping the existence of *Oblivion* on PS3 a secret for about six months, so he's very glad it's finally all out in the open. Keeping quiet hasn't always been easy, though. In fact, he's had to resort to some pretty drastic measures from time to time.

THIERRY NGUYEN

duplicated himself tenfold to write this month's previews. Unfortunately, what happened was that each of the ten assumed the other nine would do the work and instead sat and heckled Alejandro for playing that terrible menace known as *God Hand*.

GIANCARLO VARANINI

is really excited that we're getting to see more and more PS3 games every day. What he isn't excited about is bad Thai food that summons angry stomach fairies that do +8 damage to his insides. It's more like King of Bad Noodles! Jerks!



LOGAN PARR

has hacked himself into the Internet, so the next time you find items missing from your desktop, you'll know who did it. Just like when we found this issue had disappeared. He "claims" he just wanted to be the first to read it. We just unplugged his computer.

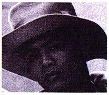
RYAN VULK

has finally beat *Chains of Promathia*. After an extremely long year of constant level caps, random deaths, and a godly amount of potions and medicines, he can finally get his precious rajas ring. Thanks go out to Memento and Hero for making this possible.

ALEJANDRO CHAVETTA

wants only one thing for his birthday, and that is a cone of sweet merciful silence, where the only noises are absolutely no noises at all. But since he can't get that, he'd like all y'all who come within 100 feet of him to shut the hell up already.

EXTENDED FAMILY



JAMES MIELKE

shares with the world his disturbingly extensive knowledge of Japan's bizarro world of pop culture in his debut as the writer of J-Town. We're a-scared. No, really.

milkman.1UP.com

PATRICK JOYNT

is very sad that Scooter would not let him review *Final Fantasy XII*, as he is in love love love. But he still had fun playing *Tiger*, and didn't HATE his other reviews.

egm_ford.1UP.com

ROBERT ASHLEY

comes from Texas, where they grow their game reviewers tall and snarky. He also makes music in not one, but two different bands. He's multifunctional like that.

robertashley.1UP.com

GREG SEWART

hails from the same country cold comes from: Canada. He recently got married, and he's about to take a full-time job, which means this is his last issue with us. Congrats, and boo.

stewy.1UP.com

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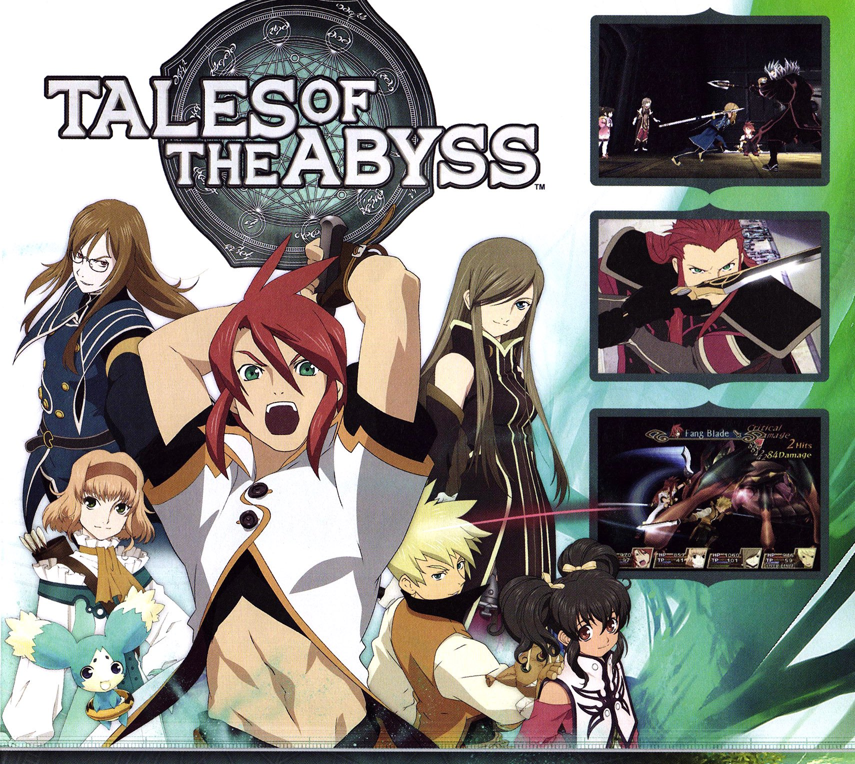

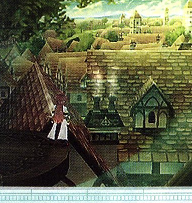

A TALE OF HONOR AND SACRIFICE, DUTY AND CHOICE, WHAT IS WRITTEN AND WHAT WILL BE.

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Fantasy Violence
Language
Simulated Gambling
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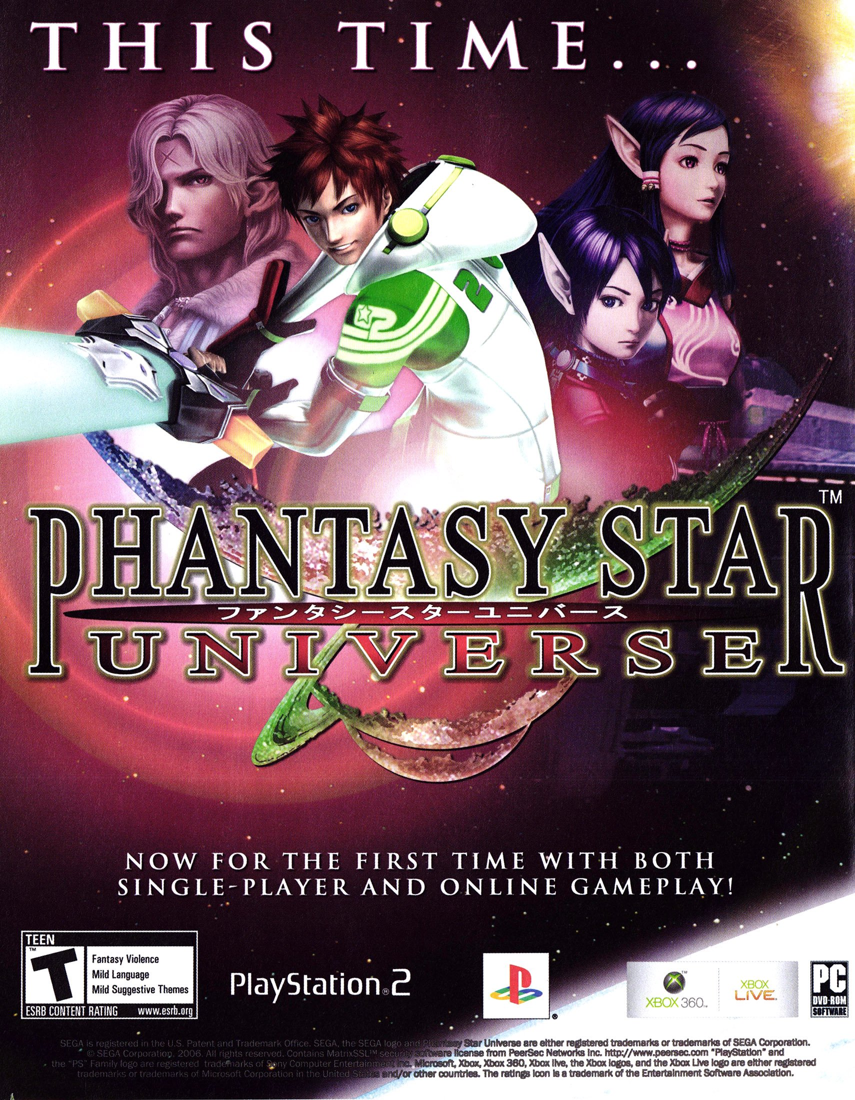

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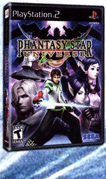
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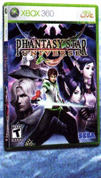
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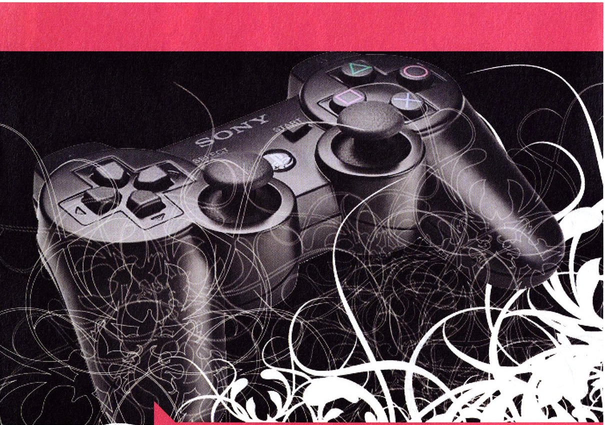


LETTER OF THE MONTH

TILT-TILATING IDEAS

In the small *Madden NFL 07* write-up on Page 63 of the September issue (*OPM* #108), you mentioned something about the game being able to use the motion-sensor feature of the PS3 controller; more specifically, that we might be able to use it for "throwing and kicking." Big whoop. When I read that, I instantly thought it was a witty joke, which would be followed by a better idea. Seriously, though, was that the best idea you people, the editors of a PlayStation magazine, could come up with? Those few words made me think "Where the #%&@ are the pages devoted to ideas about what the controller will be capable of?" This is one of the biggest changes in the Sony lineup of game systems, and you are practically ignoring it. Well, here are a few ideas I have come up with that will inspire the brilliant minds of *OPM* editors to create more ideas, and then put all the ideas into their own two-page section.

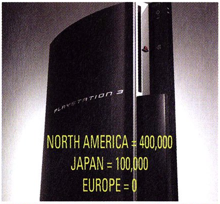
Instead of using the motion-sensor aspect of the controller to "throw a ball" in Madden, why not use it to guide a receiver's hands toward a ball? While using the analog stick to move the player, you can move the controller to move his arms, so you can precisely pinpoint the area where he will catch it.

In shooters, the tilt can be used for a lot of things, but one thing that always bothers me is the fake and somewhat linear style of leaning. Most games I experience will only allow you to press a button to make the character lean out, without any means of controlling how far he goes. Well, why not use the tilt to lean, crouch, stand on your tippy toes, and other things? This will let you control how far you go, so you have the perfect lean to get that perfect head shot.

In racing games, if the sensitivity is strong enough, you could use the controller as a steering wheel.

How about fighting games? Using the motion-sensor feature, along with the analog stick, would allow you to perform cool dodges and other neat moves.

Peter Jozwik
Via e-mail



WHAT'S ON THE OTHER SIDE?

The word is out: 400,000 units expected in North America and only 100,000 in Japan. With so few units being released and the high demand for the PS3, looks like fanboys may be left outside looking in this November 17th. Imagine the eBay bombshell that will explode. Players may find themselves paying out twice what the PS3 actually costs. Japan will be left with even more worries as the units there won't last three minutes or meet even half the demand. The PS3 has had so much hype that the launch may crumble under such a low amount of units. Can Sony keep its huge following, or will its following be forced to cross the bridge to the other side?

Juan Nunez
Via E-mail

Juan, you voice the frustration of millions of Sony fans worldwide (especially in Europe, where the PS3 won't even be available until March of next year). See EIC Tom Byron's comments on page 18 for further discussion on the PS3 shortages.

$100 FOR PS3 GAMES?! SONY WOULD NEVER OVERCHARGE LIKE THAT

I just wanted to ask a couple of questions about the PS3 and get straight and honest answers:

1) Will you still be able to rent PS3 games?
2) Are the games going to cost $100 each?

I would really like an answer, because no one on the Internet has a clue what they are talking about.

Matthew Dykstra
Via e-mail

Yeah, those Internet folks can be pretty clueless, unlike us print people who simply don't know! Anyway, to answer your questions as straight and honest as we can at this point: 1) Likely. Though there aren't any PS3 games out yet, the rental market is here to stay. 2) No, new games won't cost $100. PS3 game pricing

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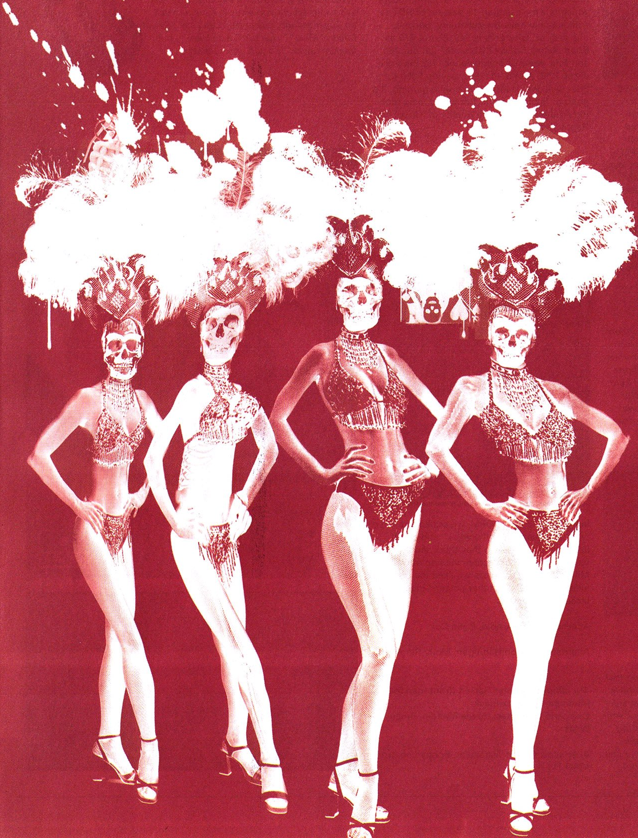
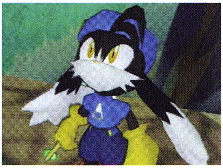


should be in line with Xbox 360 game pricing, meaning $59.99 (special or deluxe versions will be higher priced).

I'LL HAVE A TALL GLASS OF KLONOA AND PS3, PLEASE!



I was just about finished reading *OPM* #108 when I saw Klonoa in all his full-page glory. I can't tell you how many times I've pored through game sites, message boards, and Namco Japan's website in hopes of catching even a hint of a *Klonoa* sequel. In *OPM*, I thought I was about to get my wish—but alas, it was an article appreciating a "forgotten" classic. I've recently heard rumors of a *Klonoa* for the PSP, which would be better than nothing; and I'll be thrilled if *Klonoa: Door to Phantomile* appears as a download to my PSP's memory stick when Sony's PlayStation Network Platform service goes live. Still, I have high hopes that *Klonoa 3* will come to the PS3. Are you listening, Namco?

Andy Zibits
Via e-mail

Andy, we're with you: We think Klonoa reborn on the PS3 would be awesome. And Namco is definitely listening! Wielding our enormous power and influence, we used an e-mail program to forward your note to them, and here was the response: "Unsubscribe." Ha! No, they actually didn't comment, to which we respond with the line from Dumb & Dumber: "So you're telling me there's a chance!"

NOE ZOE?

What happened to Zoe Flower?

Eric Giesing
Via e-mail

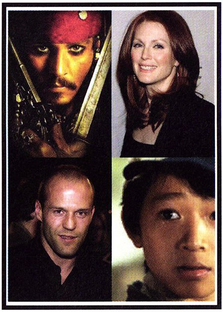
Many OPM *readers have been wondering that very same thing, Eric. Coincidentally, so have the FBI, the CIA, and the Post Office. Just kidding! In truth, legendary* OPM *contributor and columnist Zoe Flower is currently designing games for Vancouver, BC-based developer Slant Six Games. She's also expecting her first child soon. Our best wishes go out to Zoe!*

OUCH! BRIAN JUST GOT PWNED!

In response to the Letter of the Month in the September issue (*OPM* #108), reader Brian should verify his information before putting his ignorance in writing for the world to see. I'm a supporter of both Sony and Microsoft, as I'm a lover of videogame entertainment regardless of platform. Good games are good games. The two points he made in his e-mail are a bit flawed. First off, 1080p is great, but for the average gamer, not all that earth-shattering. Only high-end HDTVs support 1080p, which is why less than 15 percent of HDTVs sold actually have the capability. Second, one year of Xbox Live is $49.95, not $70 as Brian stated. So, we "Xboxers" get our 360 and four *years* of online service for the price of the PS3. And in the end, paying $600 for a PS3, well, we deserve free online gaming. It's good to finally see that Sony is at least making strides to match the quality of Xbox Live. Happy gaming, everyone!

Michael J. Kon
Via e-mail

CASTING CALL FOR OPM THE MOVIE



In Episode 18 of radiOPM, we pulled a reverse "random question of the week" and asked listeners to tell us who they think should play us editors in the big-screen version of *OPM*. Milo900 posted the picks we liked the best (his ideas are listed first; other posters' ideas are listed as alternates):

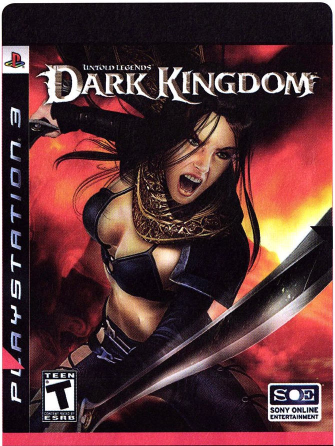
JOHNNY DEPP AS TOM
Alternates: Tom Arnold, Brian Cox
JULIANNE MOORE AS DANA
Alternates: Alyson Hannigan, Molly Ringwald
JASON STATHAM IN THE DUAL ROLE OF JOE AND GIANCARLO
Joe alternates: Peter Garrett (front man for Midnight Oil), Jack Black
Giancarlo alternates: Howie Mandel, Bruce Willis
JONATHAN KE QUAN AS SCOOTER
Alternates: Gedde Watanabe, Bobby Lee (from *MAD TV*)

THE TRUE GUITAR HEROES

I was just wondering which of the *OPM* staff can shred the best in *Guitar Hero*, and what is his (or her) favorite song/singing moment with the game?

Steve Wirzba
Via e-mail

Steve, that's easy. Giancarlo Varanini, whose Guitar Hero *skillz are nonpareil and who counts Boston's "More than a Feeling" as his fave, humbly declares, "Joe is better." Joe Rybicki, who is a former lead guitarist in real live bands where you actually have to pluck on guitar strings, responds, "Can I say "Sweet Child o' Mine"? That's in* Guitar Hero II, *but it freakin' rawks." So yes, Joe, you can.*



PS3 PACKAGING REVEALED!

Hey kids, check it out! Sony Online Entertainment gave us our first peek at official PS3 packaging and it's pretty cool. Looks like Sony guidelines are going with the Spider-Man font used on the PS3. We also noticed that they've updated the PlayStation logo "bug" (upper right corner) with a nice bold line around it. We still haven't seen what the Blu-ray casing will look like and at press time SOE was still working on the back, but so far, we like what we see.

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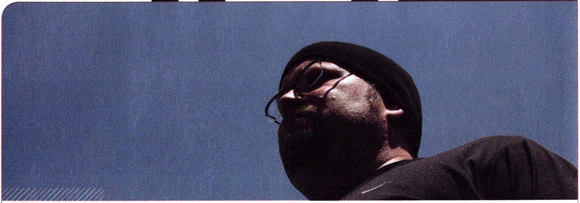

FROM ME 2 U

0 TO 100,000,000 FIVE YEARS FLAT

Sony's announcement that only 500,000 PS3s will be ready in November—and that North America will get the lion's share at 400,000—sent quakes of outrage throughout the Sony fan base (see Juan Nunez's letter on page 16). But that wasn't even the worst news: Sony also announced that the PS3 wouldn't appear in Europe until March of next year. So much for a worldwide debut and so much for what coulda—shoulda—been the biggest launch in the history of videogaming.

It seems odd that a multinational corporation that counts its income in billions and has been manufacturing consumer electronics for nearly 60 years would be so off its earlier professed plans. It seems odder that as of the day I'm writing this—September 12—PS3 manufacturing hasn't even begun. Can half a million of something as complex as the PS3 be built, boxed, and in stores in just a little over two months?

Well, of course it can—and it will, because it has to. Sony can't possibly move any further from their plans. The company has to get what it still can out of all this.

And that's likely to be a lot. It's useful to recall that Sony slashed its U.S. numbers for the PS2 from 1 million to half that when that system debuted in October 2000 at the then-high-ish price of $299. Five years later, Sony announced it had shipped over 100 million units worldwide—that's 100 followed by six zeroes—with the U.S. having an almost 40 percent share.

Whether or not Sony can pull off a threepeat with the PS3, especially with competition that didn't really exist in 2000 (no, the Dreamcast doesn't count), may not be known for another five years. But Sony remains its optimistic self, so optimistic that it's officially holding to the projection of 6 million units worldwide by the end of their fiscal year 2006 (specifically, March 31).

Seem crazy? Maybe. But consider this: By March, there will be dozens of titles available for the system, manufacturing will be at full capacity, units will be available the world over—and Sony's accustomed spot on top may once again be a reality. In the meantime, the PS2 continues to sell at a nice clip, and the PSP—well, let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Yeah, it does all seem crazy—so crazy, it just might work. See you in 100 million units (and don't forget to check out our PS3 Launch Guide in the December issue, on sale November 14). | *Tom Byron*

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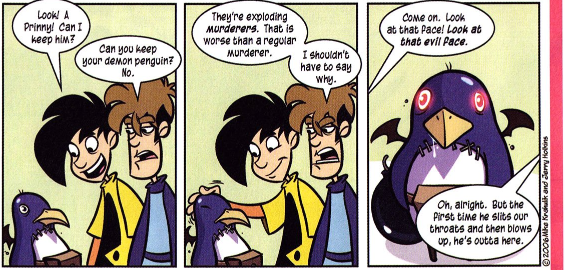
PENNY ARCADE

DISGAEA FUN


Look! A Prinny! Can I keep him?
Can you keep your demon penguin? No.
They're exploding *murderers*. That is worse than a regular murderer.
I shouldn't have to say why.
Come on. Look at that face! *Look at that evil face.*
Oh, alright. But the first time he slits our throats and then blows up, he's outta here.
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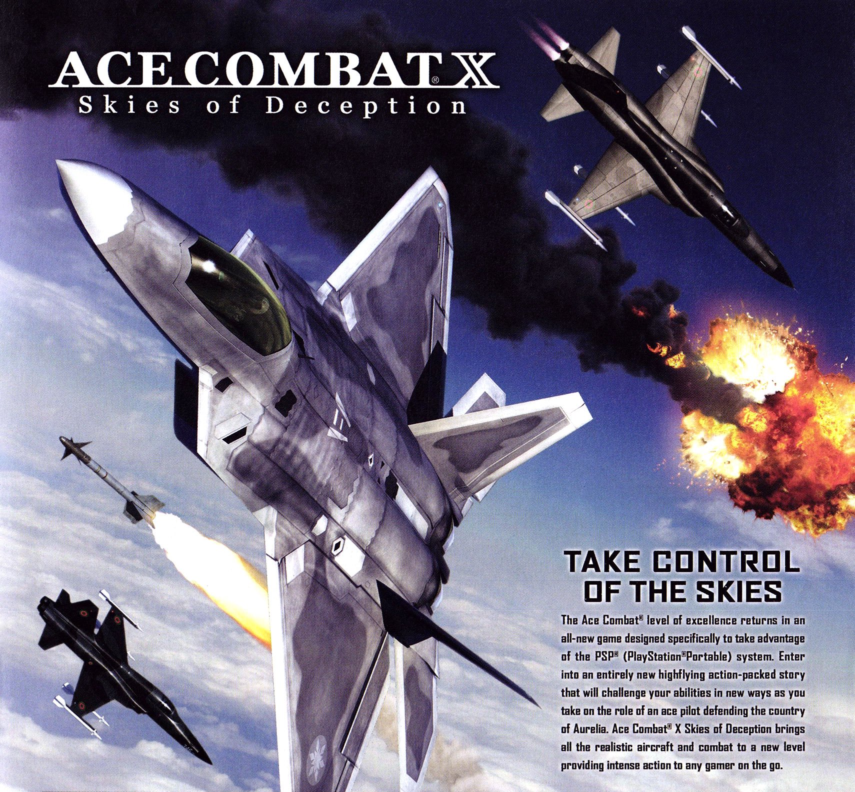

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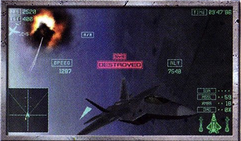

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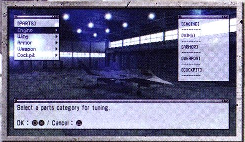

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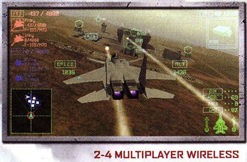

2-4 MULTIPLAYER WIRELESS BATTLES IN VARIOUS MODES

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TEEN

T

Alcohol Reference
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Partial Nudity
Suggestive Themes

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation®2

DOLBY PRO LOGIC II

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THE 360'S BEST RPG COMES TO THE PS3!

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When aliens attack!

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TAKE A

WAITING FOR THE PLAYSTATION 3: THE

Getty Images

TURN-O-MATIC

NUMBER

INEVITABLE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF THE LAUNCH

If, for some reason, you've been out canoeing in the middle of the ocean and have yet to hear the news—Sony Computer Entertainment Europe has delayed the launch of the PlayStation 3 in that territory from November 17 to an undisclosed date in March 2007. While those in Europe were and still are understandably angry about the news, this decision by Sony begs a bigger question: Should the launch also be delayed in North America?

Perhaps a better question would be: Should Europe have received North America's paltry 400,000 units and gone ahead with a launch, while North America was the territory to wait until spring? Of the three regions, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe has been the most proactive in promoting and marketing the very idea of the PlayStation 3, while the two other territories have communicated mixed messages about the system, including whether or not they should be calling it a computer. Indeed, Europe already has a relatively large ad campaign for the system, backed by the slogan "This is living." Additionally, as of press time, the first of six short films focused on the "This is living" theme had been released on the Internet, with each film focusing on one of the most important features of the PlayStation 3. Sony Europe has even made these films available for download on its excellent PSP download site—in another move that demonstrates how far ahead it is marketing-wise compared to Japan and North America. All of this has been serving to stir up hype for a system that was originally supposed to launch within three months. And then the delay was announced, and Europe got the shaft.

Meanwhile, the sound of crickets could be heard chirping in Japan and North America. Outside of Sony's slogan "Play Beyond" at E3, the public has heard little to nothing in the form of a marketing push from either region; communication about the system has been limited to a few quotes from Ken Kutaragi, president of Sony Computer Entertainment, and some quips from Kaz Hirai, president of Sony Computer Entertainment America. There have been virtually no signs of a marketing campaign, and yet the launch date grows near, as does the inevitable shortage of consoles.

In October 2000, Sony launched the PlayStation 2 in North America with a shipment of 500,000 units, which led to massive shortages. Customers were left wondering where they could get PlayStation 2s and how long they would have to wait for them. Now imagine that launch minus 100,000 units. Out of those 400,000 units being shipped, most of them are reportedly going to be the $600 version of the system, which may work to Sony's advantage in that it might prevent a horde of early adopters from rushing out and buying the system on day one.

But Japan will have it even worse. Japanese stores have access to an allotment of only 100,000 units for launch day, compared to the 720,000 units that were available for the launch of the PlayStation 2 in Japan. Japan also has the added fun factor of an open pricing structure for the system, essentially meaning that retail outlets can price the PS3 however they see fit, whether that price be $1,000 or $1,200. No matter how high they go, though, the simple fact is that there will not be enough units to meet demand.

So why not delay the launch in all territories so that an adequate number of units can be provided for all territories? Not only would this tactic allow more people to actually buy a PlayStation 3 on day one, but it would give developers more time to put some polish on their games and integrate features that are being left out due to time constraints. *OPM* has heard reports from developers who haven't been able to incorporate some of the motion-sensing controller features, simply because there hasn't been enough time to rework the control scheme and get the game ready for the launch.

Regardless of how many compelling reasons there are to delay the North American launch, however, it just won't happen. For starters, Microsoft showed that you can have a "successful" launch with relatively few units, selling approximately 326,000 units in about in a week from the Xbox 360's launch date. And when it comes down to it, Sony can't really afford to let Microsoft have another uncontested, all-important holiday shopping season to itself, and Nintendo's Wii will only complicate things further. The 360 has already enjoyed the benefits of having a year's head start over the competition—a competition that applies to mindshare just as much as it does to actual sales of the system. As it stands now, Sony will already have its work cut out making a dent in either category.

PS3 TO PSP

FOR YOU AND ME

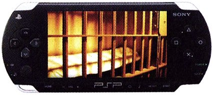
We've all seen the PSP being demonstrated as a rearview mirror for the PlayStation 3 *F1 06* game, and while we haven't officially seen anything else demonstrated with this feature, we're still excited about the potential it has—especially if the PSP is a little light on releases. So, without further ado, here are a few options developers should take into consideration while making their games.

EXTRA EYES

Imagine that you're playing a first-person shooter and you want to switch to some alternative view of the action, whether it's infrared, heat vision, or any other such blatant rip-off from *Predator*. All you have to do is activate it and take a look at your PSP without totally compromising your default view of the action. Would it be annoying to pick up the PSP every time you use it? Yeah, probably, but it sounds cool.

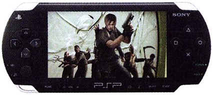
PRISON BREAK

No one has really tried to do a game set in prison, and why would they want to? But just think of the possibilities with the PS3 and PSP connection! You could use it as one of those mirrors to peer out of your cell to see who's walking down the hall, whether it's one of the "screws" or a "fish." (That's what those in the know call guards and new prisoners, respectively.) You learn something new every day in the pages of *OPM*.



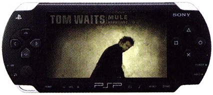
CRIB NOTES

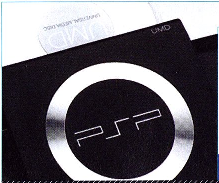
In *Resident Evil 4*, or in any other *Resident Evil* game, didn't you hate how you had to switch to the menu to see any sort of documents? Well, with the PSP, all you'd have to do is simply look down and read whatever important file you came across. Though maybe it's not such a good idea to stop and look away when zombies are lurking about.

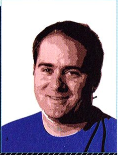


LISTEN UP

We've all dreamed of the day that a good rhythm game (emphasis on good) would be able to incorporate your preexisting music library. Well, if one of these games could access whatever music you have on your PSP, it would make it much easier than inserting individual CDs into the PS3. Plus, it would actually give people a reason to put music on their PSPs.







WHAT'S IN YOUR PSP?

IT DOES MORE THAN PLAY GAMES

LAFFY TAYLOR
Producer, *Elder Scrolls Travels: Oblivion*

GAMES
2006 FIFA World Cup
The U.S.A. gets to win when I play.

MOVIES
28 Days Later
Fast zombies never looked better.

MUSIC
Band of Horses
These guys are so good, so you'll never hear them on the radio.

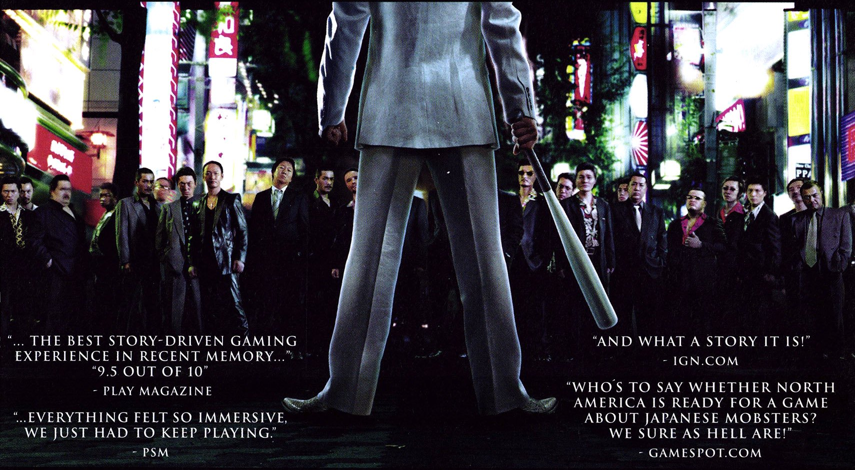
WEB
Penny-Arcade.com
It's funny because it's true.

PLAYSTATION BITS

BYTE-SIZED NEWS

Companies are already letting some info fly on some of the bigger games that are coming to the PS3, such as *Devil May Cry 4*. Capcom has already revealed that Dante will not be the only character this time around, but will be joined by another character named Nero, who is presumably linked to Vergil in some form or another. We do know that he's a member of a special group of knights. Additionally, the game will take place between the original *DMC* and *DMC2* and feature much of the same combat style.... In other PS3 news, *Fight Night Round 3* will have some features not in the Xbox 360 version, such as ESPN integration and a new "get in the ring" mode. Hey, don't forget about the PS2 and the PSP.... Electronic Arts announced that it's releasing a Sega Genesis compilation for both the PS2 and PSP. The collection is scheduled to have some of EA's best games from that era, including *Desert Strike, Jungle Strike, Mutant League Football,* and *Road Rash*, just to name a few.... Lastly, those lovable Penny Arcade guys are up to more do-goodery in the form of $10,000 game-designer scholarship. Check www.penny-arcade.com for more information.

STEP INTO THE SHADOWS OF JAPAN'S UNDERWORLD.



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- PLAY MAGAZINE

"...EVERYTHING FELT SO IMMERSIVE, WE JUST HAD TO KEEP PLAYING."
- PSM

"AND WHAT A STORY IT IS!"
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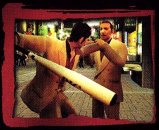

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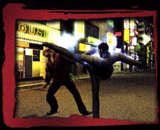
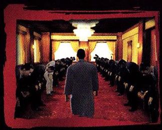
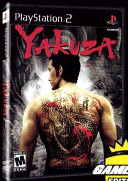


STRIKE WITH POWERFUL FINISHING BLOWS AS YOU UPGRADE YOUR SKILLS



AVENGE DISHONOR THROUGH THE TWISTING, DRAMATIC STORYLINE



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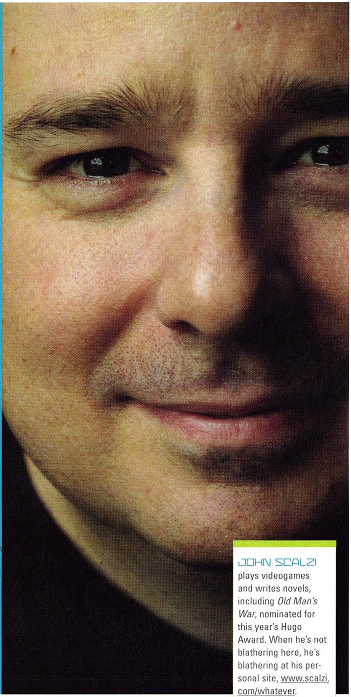
THE BIG PICTURE

BY JOHN SCALZI



JOHN SCALZI plays videogames and writes novels, including *Old Man's War*, nominated for this year's Hugo Award. When he's not blathering here, he's blathering at his personal site, www.scalzi.com/whatever.

SCALZI TO ONLINE GAMING: DROP DEAD

I'm going to let you in on a shameful little secret of mine: I don't give a damn about online play. Really, I just don't. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games? I couldn't care less. Playing head-to-head against a real live human somewhere out in the murky depths of teh Intarwebs? I'd rather not. Joining a group of compadres for a bit of first-person shooter squad-based goodness? I prefer to play with bots, thanks. The fact is, despite all the buzz about integrating the online game experience seamlessly into the next generation of game consoles, it's the thing I care least about—and the one thing that worries me most.

Why don't I care about online gaming? Oh, let me count the ways.

1 I don't have the time: Oddly enough, when you have a job, a family, and some semblance of a non-game-related life, you end up not having hours at a time to devote to leveling up and going on campaigns and such. You want to be able to easily jump into a gaming experience and then just as easily jump back out of it, whether you have a half hour of free time or just five minutes. There are online and live-player options for quick-in, quick-out gaming, but overall, that still takes more time than just firing up the console and simply having a quick button-mashing session.

2 I don't have the patience: Related to this, being in a single-player experience gives you more control over the flow of the game. There's no problem trying to find someone else to square off against or arranging a time for your guild to go raiding. Also, there's no worry about whether your broadband connection sucks or if someone has sprayed Fresca all over the server farm—your game is all client-side, ready to go when you are.

> ONLINE GAMING IS THE THING I CARE LEAST ABOUT—AND THE ONE THING THAT WORRIES ME MOST.

3 I don't need the aggravation: No offense, kids, but as an old fart on the downslope to age 40, I don't want to spend a whole lot of time dealing with 15-year-old cretins swearing at me in the latest mutation of leetspeak (or, worse, 35-year-old cretins doing the same thing to fit in with the kids. I mean, eeew. That's creepy). I just want to go into my game and kill me some pixels in peace. It's not too much to ask.

Which is not to say I don't enjoy a good multiplayer game now and then—I do. I've been enjoying them since I (and a bunch of other geeks) used to play all-night sessions of *Marathon* and *Quake* a whole decade ago. There's a special satisfaction that comes from beating another human in a game. But more often than not, I simply want to lose myself for a few minutes in an immersive gaming experience, and the fact is that all the trappings of the online multiplayer experience simply act to remind me that I'm not leaving the world behind; I'm just transplanting some of it into my game time.

Now, gamemakers like the online multiplayer experience because it allows players to entertain themselves and creates another revenue channel. That's all well and good. My concern is that, as more emphasis goes to multiplayer, the single-player experience will become an afterthought, if it's there at all—gaming will become another thing we have to make time for, instead of being able to fit it into the time we have. Remember that most gamers are actually grown-ups with lives; dropping it all just to play a game isn't possible or desirable for a lot of us.

So, yes: Online play is fine. Just keep in mind those of us who like to go it alone. |

Photo: E. Hardesty

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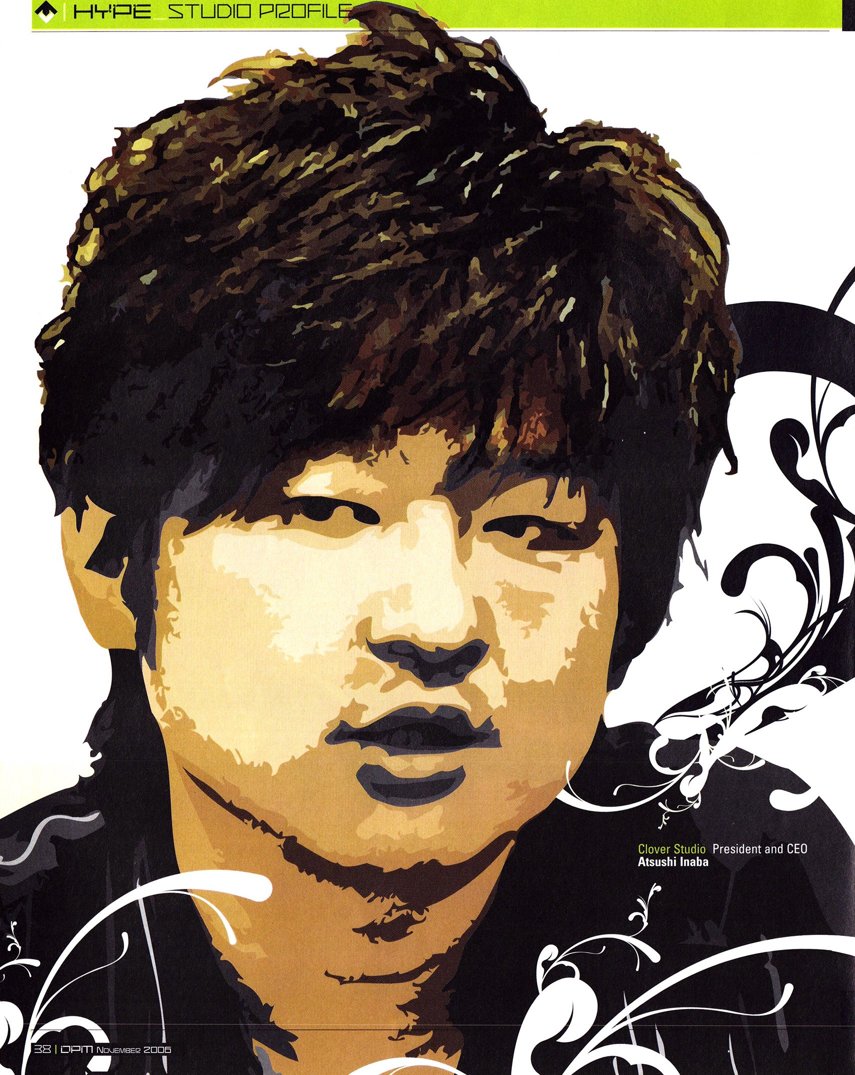
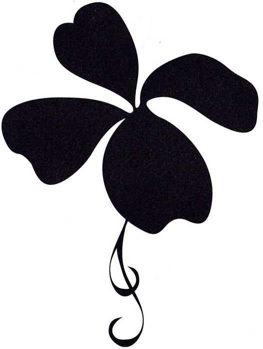


Clover Studio President and CEO
Atsushi Inaba



CLOVER STUDIO

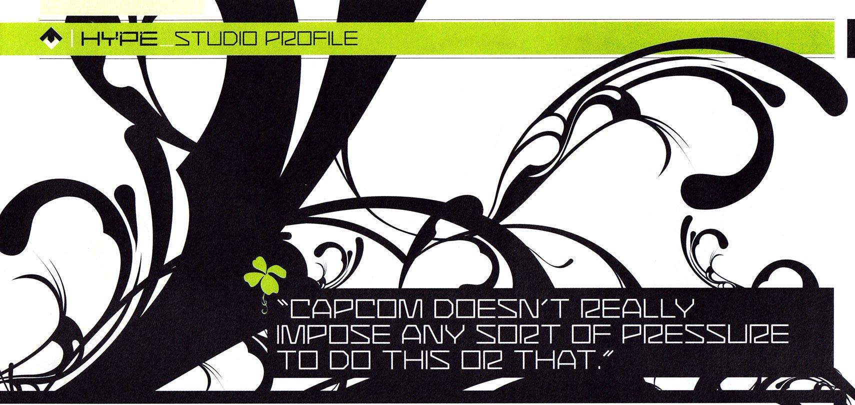
CAPCOM'S GOOD LUCK CHARM

Normally, employees of a company like Capcom just don't get up and leave without a good reason for doing so. While the reasons behind the exodus that led to the formation of Clover Studio aren't totally clear—cries of more creative freedom have been intermingled with the simpler explanation of the move being a reorganization of Capcom's internal teams—the fact remains that it couldn't have been a better move for all involved. Actually, since its formation in July 2004, Clover Studio has become the golden child of Capcom, producing new and exciting games, including several *Viewtiful Joe* titles and, recently, the beautiful *Okami*.

And there's a pretty good reason why the studio is seeing such great success. Atsushi Inaba, president of Clover Studio and the driving creative force behind games like *Viewtiful Joe*, has some of the best minds in the industry to work with, including *Resident Evil* creator Shinji Mikami and the immensely talented Hideki Kamiya, who directed the original *Devil May Cry*. But even for them, approaching the formation of a new studio wasn't as simple as getting up and walking out the door without a clear goal. "Since everyone who left was basically a creator, the most important thing to them was to create a game they wanted to create—for example, like *Okami*," says Clover

RÉSUMÉ

Viewtiful Joe (2004)
Viewtiful Joe 2 (2004)
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble (2006)
Okami (2006)
God Hand (2006)



> “CAPCOM DOESN’T REALLY IMPOSE ANY SORT OF PRESSURE TO DO THIS OR THAT.”

president and CEO Atsushi Inaba. “They had that in front of them, so they weren’t really thinking, ‘Should I go or not go?’ But, of course, they were very nervous about what the future might hold and things like that.”

Naturally, Capcom wasn’t completely excited about the idea of its key players moving elsewhere in its Osaka-based headquarters. “There weren’t any threats like, ‘We’re going to leave if you don’t do this for us!’ or anything like that. It was nothing that extreme, but the idea did come from us, not from Capcom,” says Inaba. “It was actually something that the group that became Clover proposed to Capcom and said, ‘Wouldn’t this work out if we did this? We’d have more freedom.’ So we actually worked this out with Capcom to help them realize that this was the best thing for both sides. Then, of course, when [we were] starting up the studio there were growing pains, and there’s still some resistance now and then. Capcom wasn’t totally happy about it, but they consented that this could work out.”

Chances are a game like *Okami*—or any original intellectual property for that matter—may not have been green-lit within Capcom’s walls since there’s a greater financial risk involved with new ideas. But that’s what Clover Studio is all about: taking risks. “Since I’ve always tried to give my teams as much creative freedom as possible, even within the Capcom structure, it hasn’t been as big a change for them. But in terms of the range of games they could make and range of ideas you can have, if you’re inside Capcom, there’s a certain limit of what you can make. But by branching out into Clover, even if it is in the same building—although maybe we argue with Capcom over details a lot,” Inaba admits with a laugh, “there’s a lot more freedom in the end. Although we still have to discuss things with Capcom, who is our publisher, it still gives us more freedom to try new ideas.”

But what was the most important thing for Inaba and his team at Clover? “I definitely wanted to have the ability to make a new game,” he says. “I didn’t just want to make the same games that the marketing team wanted us to.”

Still, there’s always the problem of what happens if a game isn’t a success. In that respect Inaba, Mikami, and Kamiya all have to keep in mind that they’re in a business, and it’s one that looks at the bottom line as a sign of triumph or failure. Would there ever be a point where Capcom pressures them to make a sequel for a proven franchise? “The thing we do have to worry about, obviously, from Capcom’s perspective, is [the company thinking] ‘Do we need Clover?’ or ‘Can Clover [afford to keep making] games that don’t sell?’ and things like that. But if Capcom had the right to say things like that to us, then we wouldn’t really need to exist as Clover,” Inaba answers. “So right now, they don’t really impose any sort of pressure on us to do this or that. The most important thing to us is to have one team together to make an interesting game, avoid outside influences, and stay together as a team. That’s our mission.”

Indeed, Clover’s collaboration with Capcom has proven to be a fruitful one, at least on the PlayStation 2. With the PlayStation 3 and other next-generation systems, the question of financial risks becomes much more pronounced because it simply costs so much to make a game. At the moment, it seems Inaba’s hopes of staying together as a team will remain intact, but for how long? “We’re definitely worried about it, because it’s more expensive to develop for those systems,” Inaba remarks—but he’s also quick to point out other problems besides the hardware. “Even beyond that, what we’re seeing with this set of next-generation systems is that, depending on the system, there are different countries that have certain systems that sell and don’t sell. So the regions are different; if you’re developing for America you might have to make for a certain piece of hardware, but if you want to sell in Japan you have to make it for a different piece of hardware,” he says. “There are even possibly user-class divisions. Young people have this system, middle-aged people have this system—you have all these divisions, so you have to think very carefully about [these questions:] ‘What kind of game do we want to make, who do we want to make it for, and what system is the best for that?’”

Given their druthers, Inaba and the rest of the team would love to be able to sit back and see how the industry progresses over the next few years. “I’d love to actually think about that and see how the market develops [with the next-generation systems], but the problem is we’d be too late if we did that. So it’s very troubling to have to pick a system, because it’s hard to tell where they’re going to be in a few years or what the market will be like. [What we do know is that] if the Japanese market keeps shrinking, I’d rather move the studio to London or Los Angeles.”

As for Inaba’s opinion of the next-generation systems, much like the rest of the world, he knows that Sony’s been on top, but that position could potentially be a part of what makes the PlayStation 3 a hard sell to the public, particularly considering the cost of the system and its games. “One of the most interesting things is that Sony’s been at the top of its game for the last couple of generations, but with the PlayStation 3, there’s more challenge involved,” Inaba says. “[The company has] put all these interesting features on it, but since it’s so early in the game, it feels like maybe Sony doesn’t really have a vision of how exactly they’re going to use these features or what it’s going to turn into. With the Wii you have the controller and with the Xbox you have Xbox Live and a few other things; they both have a distinct vision, but with Sony, you don’t sense that there’s a distinction of what they’re going after. So how they develop that and how they progress is going to be very interesting.”

We can only hope that Clover Studio will retain its freedom and that we’ll continue to see more from them.

CLOVER’S ONLINE PLANS

Clover believes that Microsoft’s Xbox Live model should act as a standard for Sony to follow with its own online plans. “[Microsoft has] the experience behind it; they’ve proven that they can do a good job with online,” Atsushi Inaba, president of Clover Studio, says. “Making a game for Live Arcade, where you may not have to put as many resources into it as you would a game that has to be sold at the store—there’s that and the online multiplayer component.”

THE DEATH OF ONE AWAKENS A PATH TO THE END.

THE LONG-ANTICIPATED CONCLUSION TO AN EPIC TRILOGY.

Over 8 hours of movies including voiced cut scenes.

An easily accessible in-game "Xeno Bible" includes every detail from the entire Xenosaga® series.

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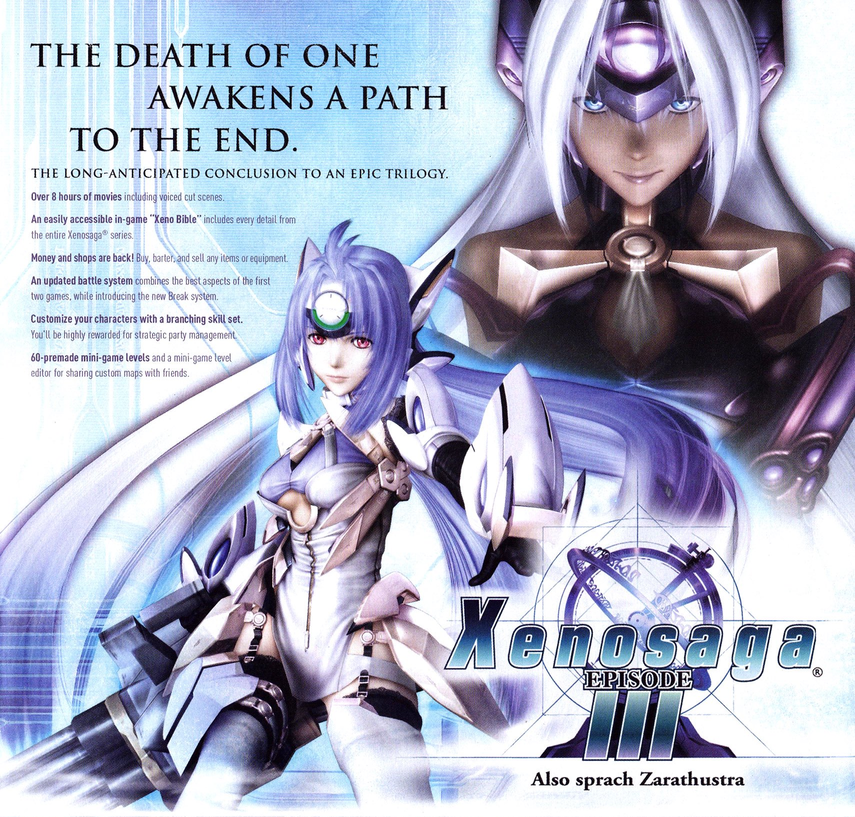

Xenosaga® EPISODE III

Also sprach Zarathustra

Wolf Fang
BOOST
53
53
Shion HP 297 EP 29
Miyuki HP 256 EP 25
REVENGE
Malicious Charge
E.S. Dinah HP 47059
E.S. Reuben HP 60430

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence

PlayStation®2

BANDAI NAMCO Games™

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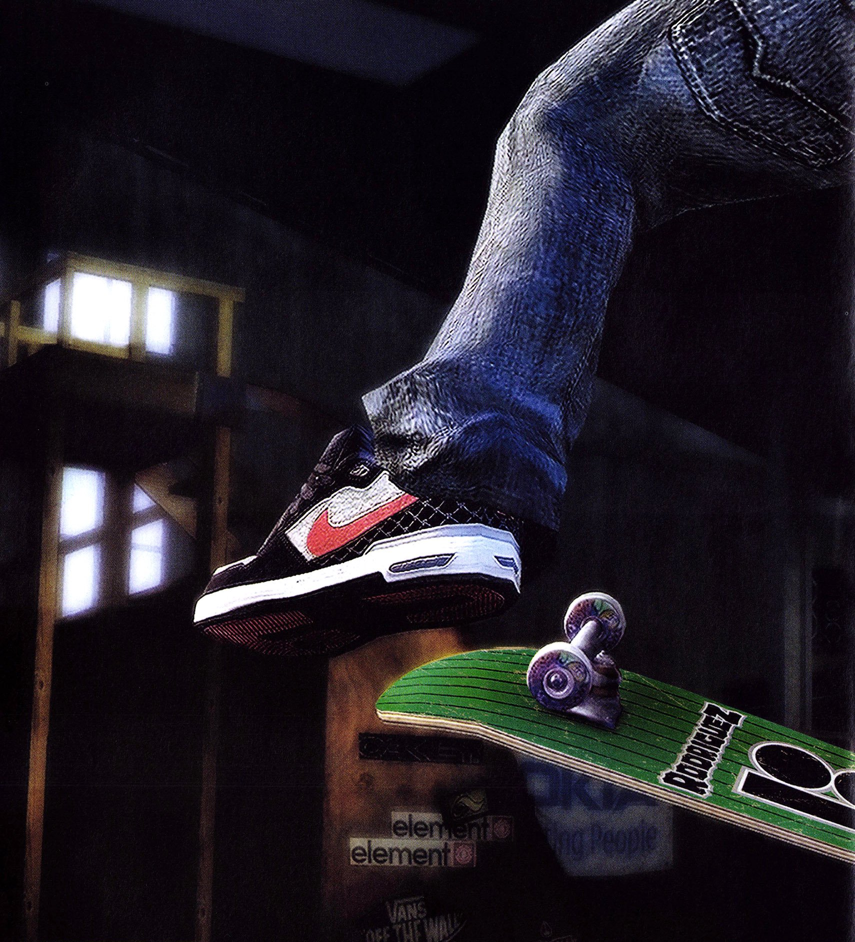

TEEN

T

Blood
Crude Humor
Language
Mild Violence

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Available for the PlayStation®3 computer entertainment system, the PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system and the PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system

XBOX

XBOX 360

XBOX LIVE

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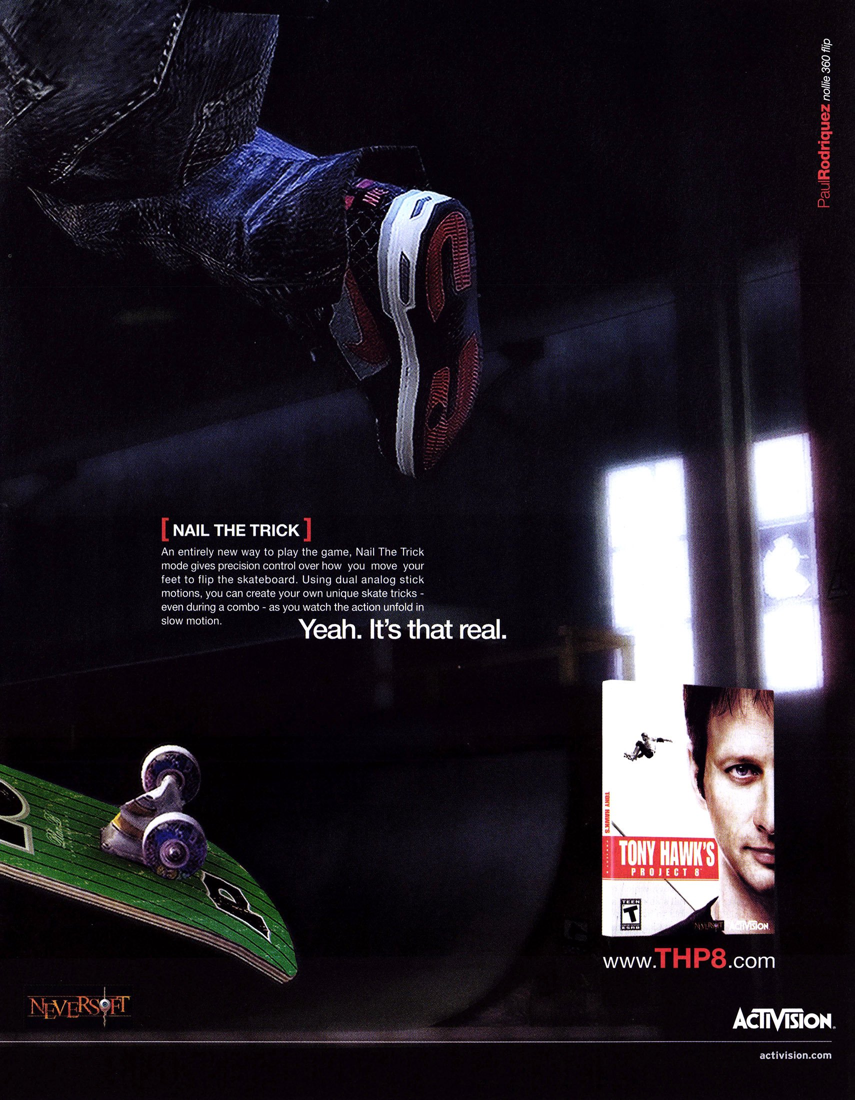

PaulRodriquez nollie 360 flip
TONY HAWK'S
TONY HAWK'S
PROJECT 8
TEEN
T
ESRB
NEVERSOFT
ACTIVISION

[NAIL THE TRICK]

An entirely new way to play the game, Nail The Trick mode gives precision control over how you move your feet to flip the skateboard. Using dual analog stick motions, you can create your own unique skate tricks - even during a combo - as you watch the action unfold in slow motion.

Yeah. It's that real.

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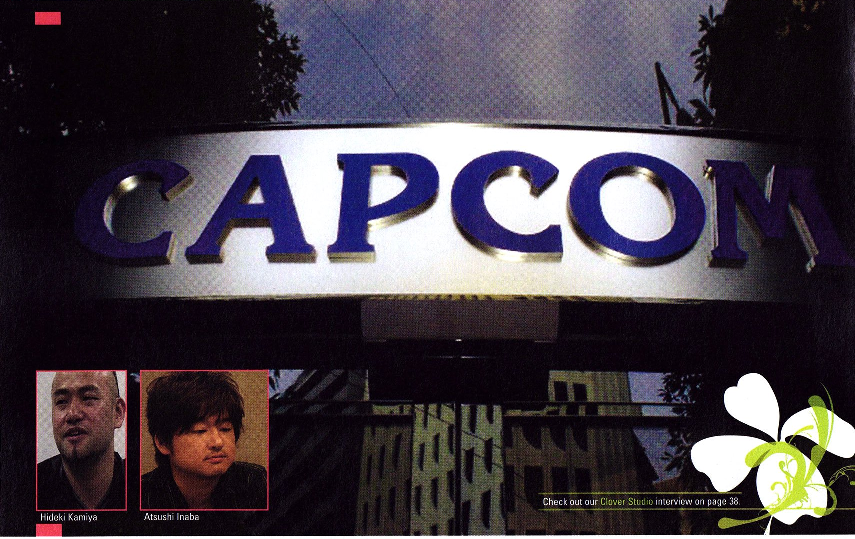
NEVERSOFT

ACTIVISION.

activision.com



Hideki Kamiya

Atsushi Inaba

Check out our Clover Studio interview on page 38.

J-TOWN

CAPCOM ADVENTURE

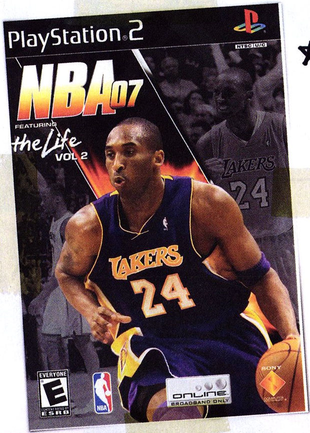
In my seemingly endless trips to Japan over the years (still waiting for my honorary citizenship, complete with 500-yen discount coupon redeemable at any MOS Burger franchise), I'd yet to actually travel to anywhere outside of the Tokyo metropolitan area (although the Tokyo area's quite large, even compared to American megalopolises such as the New York City area and the San Francisco Bay Area). Somehow, in all of the business trips that had sent me to Japan, I'd never set aside any personal time to shoot to Kyoto—or anywhere else west of Tokyo. That all changed when I went back to Japan to visit Capcom, which is based in Osaka, approximately three hours west of Tokyo by train (three hours by the Shinkansen, aka the "bullet train," no less). First of all, I was sort of surprised by how much it cost to take the train. I knew it wouldn't be cheap, but it was 14,200 yen (about $120 U.S.) each way, which made the round trip come out to 240 bucks. Wow. That's as much as a flight to some places.

Still, I was glad to be able to head down to Capcom's offices, partly because I'd never been to them before, but also because I wondered what Osaka was like compared to Tokyo. Osaka, as it turned out, was pretty nondescript. I didn't really have time to take the city in, but from what little I saw, it could've been a district of Tokyo, as there were no real distinguishing characteristics. Maybe if I'm down that way again, I'll set aside more time for sightseeing.

When I got to the Capcom offices, I was surprised by how demure they were compared to other publishers I've visited. Sega, for example, features the famous blue Sega logo on all of its buildings and heralds your arrival with a rotating Sonic statue, whose finger is aimed in your direction. While that's not necessarily the most extravagant show of branding in the world, it's a bit flashier than Capcom's simple "Capcom" logo situated above the door to its office building. The lobby is equally unadorned, save for a couple of kiosks offering visitors a free play of some of its recent games. It's funny—as a teenager with a pocketful of quarters, taking my full lunch hour from my high school job at Record World to play the Capcom arcade classic *Forgotten Worlds*, I never thought I'd be visiting the company offices one day. But here I was.

> I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE VISITING THE CAPCOM OFFICES ONE DAY.

I was there to interview Clover Studio president Atsushi Inaba and Clover game director Hideki Kamiya, who's one of the most elusive interviews in the gaming business. Kamiya directed *Resident Evil 2*, *Devil May Cry*, *Viewtiful Joe*, and *Okami*, and he was my main reason for coming to Japan. By now, you've hopefully read *OPM*'s review of *Okami* and *rushed* out to buy the game. It's a masterpiece—and it deserves to be a hit. | *James Mielke*


PlayStation 2
NTSC U/C
NBA 07
FEATURING
the Life
VOL 2
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EVERYONE
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
NBA
ONLINE
BROADBAND ONLY
SONY
COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT

DEAR MY RIVAL

KOBE BRYANT,

AKA THE "MAMBA"!

First off, I'd like to say congratulations to you Kobe, for ROBBING ME of the cover for NBA 07 the Life Vol. 2. It's a GREAT GAME,

← Should've BEEN ME on the COVER.

I figured that with my vast Knowledge of life in the NBA, I SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE COVER ATHLETE, But No, they GAVE IT to You Kobe. Now you're going to have to prove you earned the right to grace the cover of SUCH A GREAT GAME. YEAH MAMBA, I'M TALKING TO YOU and in CASE you haven't noticed, this is an INVITE TO COME tangle with me, the "MONGOOSE" FOR SOME 1 ON 1 ACTION IN LasVEGAS during ALL-STAR Break. I might even let you shoot for take out. You might play 82 GAMES a season, but guess what "MAMBA," the MonGOOSE balls year round!!!!!

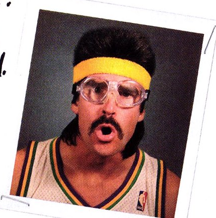
P.S. Good luck trying to drop 81, gonna be tough since we're only playing to 11.

Billy Joe Cuthbert

AKA the "Mongoose"

Former Guard UTAH JAZZ

"the 'goose is LOOSE"



TRENDSPOTTER

LAND OF THE RISING FUN

The Tokyo Game Show has come and gone, and we couldn't be more excited about the huge number of playable PlayStation 3 games that we could get our grubby hands on at the show. Here are a few of the games the *OPM* editors are most excited about after their whirlwind TGS tour. Games such *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*, or others that appeared in trailer form or were otherwise unplayable, were disqualified from the selection. As always, for up-to-the-minute information on these and other PlayStation 3 games, be sure to check out www.1UP.com.

TOM BYRON
Heavenly Sword
Lair
Resistance: Fall of Man

DANA JONGEWAARD
The Eye of Judgment
Heavenly Sword
Lair

JOE RYBICKI
Heavenly Sword
Lair
MotorStorm

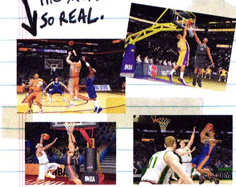
THIERRY NGUYEN
Devil May Cry 4
Heavenly Sword
Lair

GIANCARLO VARANINI
Devil May Cry 4
Lair
Devil May Cry 4 (yes, again)

DEVIL MAY CRY 4

NBA 07 the LIFE vol 2 IS ABSOLUTELY MY FAVORITE GAME!!

I MEAN, CHECK OUT the GRAPHICS, THEY'RE SO REAL.



Because IF I'M GONNA beat the "MAMBA" I Gotta Know how he slithers, and since THE LIFE MODE IS ALL ABOUT RIVALRIES, I play "THE KID" & "BIG W." IT Helps me prepare for my real-life rivalry w/KOBE.

come visit my WEB-LAIR @ mambavsmongoose.com

PlayStation®2

NBA 07 featuring the Life VOL 2
NBA.COM
ONLINE BROADBAND ONLY
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PLAY IN OURS.®

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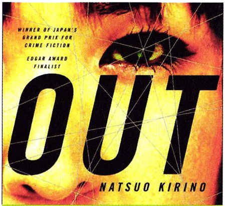
PAUSE WHEN YOU'RE NOT PLAYING GAMES

SEE

THE WIRE

www.hbo.com

The Sopranos might be the most high-profile member of HBO's excellent original TV series, but in our humble opinions, the network's best show is actually *The Wire*. Set in Baltimore, the series explores the gritty reality behind the war on drugs in a post-9/11 world, and it features some of the most excellent acting and writing to ever grace the small screen. Each season follows a single story arc, where all the seemingly disparate pieces slowly come together by the end. Check out the first three seasons on DVD, and then tune into Season Four, which is currently playing on HBO.



WINNER OF JAPAN'S GRAND PRIX FOR CRIME FICTION

EDGAR AWARD FINALIST

OUT

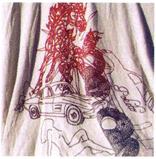
NATSUO KIRINO

OUT

www.amazon.com

What do boxed lunches, mountains of debt, and the dismemberment of corpses have in common? They're all central to the plot of *Out*, a novel from noted Japanese author Natsuo Kirino. After some coworkers help their friend take care of her useless husband, they soon realize that they're in for more than they bargained for when what they've done is soon discovered. Not for the faint of heart, this crime thriller offers a great look at the seedy side of Tokyo and Japanese culture.

FEEL



COOL TEES

www.poketo.com

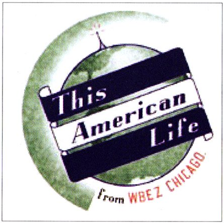
Buying your clothes at Target or The Gap means that you always run the risk of appearing in public to discover you're dressed the same as everyone else. That's why we love Poketo, a site that offers clothing and accessories emblazoned with illustrations from up-and-coming artists. And they won't break the bank—most of these tees are priced at $24. Plus, you won't show up wearing the same shirt as that guy who always picks his nose.

HYPERMOTARD

www.ducati.com

Normally, we'd say that anyone who rides a Ducati is a prissy jackass. But we're going to make an exception for their newest piece of machinery, the Hypermotard, which is about as sexy as a bike can get. Though it was originally designed as a concept bike, Ducati chose to produce it after the prototype won multiple awards for its design. It won't be available for purchase till next spring, but that should give you time to save your pennies, since you know it won't come cheap.

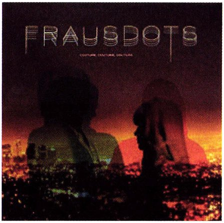
LISTEN



THIS AMERICAN LIFE

www.thislife.org

NPR programs have a somewhat deserved rep for being boring. But *This American Life* isn't your typical radio show. Each week, host Ira Glass presents a collection of stories based around one central theme, which can range from experimental phases to semen. They're funny, they're sad, but they're never boring. Find it on an NPR station near you, or listen to free streamed shows on the website—we highly recommend "First Day," particularly Act 2.



SUB POP

www.subpop.com

Sub Pop is probably best known as the label that launched Nirvana, but its roster of artists confirms that it has excellent taste overall. Whether you listen to some of its higher-profile groups such as Sleater-Kinney, Soundgarden, and The Shins, or you prefer lesser-known acts such as Frausdots, Iron and Wine, and Fruit Bats, you'll be happy to have it on your iPod. Stop by the label's website and pick out a new band at random—trust us, you'll be happy.

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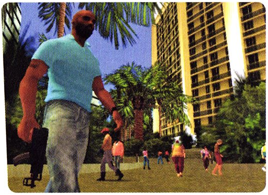

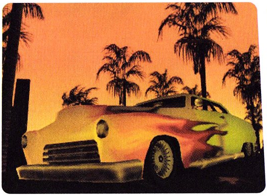

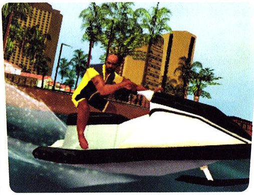

PlayStation® Portable

RATING PENDING
RP
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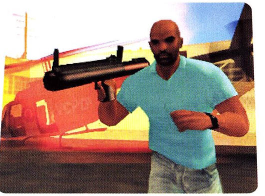

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Criter
GAMES
SRC TEAM 2001

ALEX WARD

CRITERION'S CHIEF ENTHUSIAST

photo by JONNY KRIEG

It may be difficult to imagine at times, but people who make games play games as well. In fact, some of the best designers are the ones who take the time to see what other industry veterans are coming up with in order to make their own games better. Such is the case with Alex Ward, a hardcore gamer if there ever was one—who just happens to be the creative director of Criterion Games. His story is that of many who play games and dream to make them. Going from giving *Mortal Kombat* cheats to one of the best-known and liked racing series on the globe—he's done it all. But, from the sound of it, there's still so much more that he wants to do.

| OPM **So you were reluctant to do this interview, but you agreed to do it anyway. Why were you hesitant?**

| ALEX WARD I've done a lot of interviews for the past five years. When I joined Criterion, the company didn't have a very high profile, so a few of us agreed that I'd do it because I knew the PR people that I was working with. I've worked on the publishing side of the business, so I understand how important that is. Part of having a hit game is [that] you can make the best game in the world, but if nobody knows about it, nobody hears about it. And we learned a lot on *Burnout 1* in terms of how more successful we could've been if we'd done more things earlier and said yes to a lot of things.

But after *Black*, I just got exhausted of it. I felt, "I'm happiest being here [at Criterion Games headquarters in Guildford, England] working on the games." Every day that I come to work, there's always something interesting and new for me to review or look at. So that's what I enjoy much more. The thing I hate to do the most is talk about the software [before] it's finished. But on *Black*, we had to do that because it was an anticipated game. I was away talking about it to press the weekend we were finishing it, and I'd much rather have been here finishing it, you know?

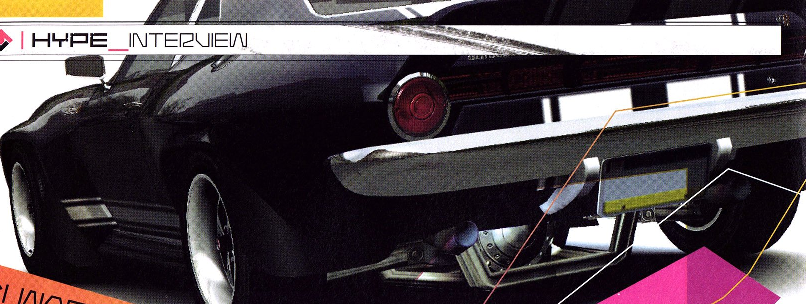
With the *Burnout* team, which is my team—but it's not just me standing at the front; it's 70 members—the thing that's exciting for me is that I want to bring my people forward because it's exciting stuff to talk about the game and everything. But I've just done it. I've given them everything.

| OPM **We've sucked every piece out of you.**

| AW Yeah, almost. But we want to push the game as far as we can, right? So it's hard because, on one side, I think that we don't do enough of that in the industry, I guess. There aren't enough people coming forward and doing it.

| OPM **Well, if what we're doing right now is your least favorite part of game development, then what's your favorite part?**

| AW I think what I said earlier: I like the end of the game. I like the start of the game,



"I WAS A DREADFUL GAME TESTER AND HATED IT."

because we all know what we're going to do, but I like "the crunch." Which I shouldn't say, because everyone thinks it's all about crunch all the time. There are so many negative pictures painted of the games industry at the moment that just aren't true. I like the end of the game. I like making a lot of rapid changes. I like it when it's all coming together, and that's when the team does really march as one and get together, and that's when it really comes together. I think those final couple of weeks are the best part—I wouldn't miss it for the world. You know, when it's me and [*Burnout* producer] Hamish [Young] doing a lot of stuff. Hamish is the sort of guy that, even when he's not supposed to touch the code, will touch the code.

| OPM **Have you ever gotten any resistance from any of your publishers—first Acclaim and then EA—when you've done stuff like that, like changing it up at the last minute?**
| AW Well, we try not to tell them! When we did *Burnout 3*, it was our first time with Electronic Arts, and we were the external team, so we *really* didn't tell them! And we had a lot of procedures in place to manage the development. On *Burnout 3*, we were always a month ahead of Electronic Arts, so whenever they came in and saw anything and went, "Wow, this track's really looking good!" we were already a month ahead. Whereas now you saw it live as it is, and all the EA publishing guys are seeing it live as it is. I don't know, you tell me—what's the best part of putting the magazine together?

| OPM **Getting that last page shipped out the door. That Wednesday. Watching it go.**
| AW I think for *1*, *2*, and *3*, we'd normally finish, and then we'd have a playthrough. I guess that's one of the things we miss as we go forward. We'd normally be in the old boardroom across the street and have a final picture and a glass of champagne and play through the whole game. How we do that this time, I don't know. I've sat in meetings where they say, "We can't do this because the cost in QA is gonna be XYZ," and I'm like, "So the testers have to sweat it out! Let's go!" I think there are decisions getting made right now on a million projects around the world where they're going, "That'll be tough to test, so we're not going to do it." I'm like, "Screw it, man. I used to work in QA. They can test it."

| OPM **Can you talk a little bit about how you got into the industry?**
| AW I was always fascinated by arcade machines. I remember going for swimming lessons and noticing *Moon Cresta* in the corner and going, "That looks cool." I can tell you every coin-op I've ever played at any swimming pool I've ever been to. I used to be quite into swimming until I discovered *Space Harrier*. Then I'd just go to the pool and not swim and then go upstairs and play in the arcades. I've probably been in the industry now 10 years, 11 years, but I feel like I've been in it since '82, because I followed it.

| OPM **Were you always on the development side?**
| AW No, I was in publishing. I've kind of seen the industry from all sides. I mean, I was nearly a journalist, but I didn't get the job.

| OPM **Lucky you!**
| AW So I went to university, and I studied psychology. I wrote my end-of-year thesis on games, which was fun, a way to take games to university. I was dramatically bored by the end of university, and my time at university was the Super Nintendo years, so I can remember spending long nights playing *U.N. Squadron* and *Super Tennis*. Everything I can tell you is about the games I was playing at the time, like *Super Mario World*. I then spent a year in America, and that's when I saw the rise of the Super NES in America, and saw *Final Fight*, *Super R-Type*, and everything. I came back from America, finished my degree, and was totally unemployable.

| OPM **Hey, people say about a lot of us! Totally unemployable. [*Laughs*]**
| AW I worked for a cell-phone company, and I used to write. I had ambitions—I thought I'd be a games journalist, so I used to write about cell phones and fax machines and read [U.K. games magazine] *Edge* under the desk. I responded to every job ad in the back of *Edge*, and I got a job in QA, a company in Birmingham, England, called U.S. Gold. I was a dreadful game tester and realized I hated it. It was terrible; the games were rubbish.

I was going to quit—but before I could quit, I was fired for "gross misconduct." They found out I went to Future Publishing for a job interview to work on a magazine. It's funny—I had a job interview with people who now come to interview me. I didn't get the job because they didn't think I knew enough about games. They asked me a lot of questions about soccer in the interview, and I just said, "Pfft, don't know. I play games." And I think one of the questions was, "Name the next game released for the Sega Saturn." And I said, "I don't know. I would read your magazine to find out."

Yeah, so I didn't get the job, and I was also fired from my QA job. I was about to jump off the bridge and get a job at an insurance company. I was moonlighting, collecting unemployment, and working as a laborer fitting kitchens in the daytime. I actually fitted a ceiling like this. [*Ward points to the ceiling.*] Every time I see the ceiling tiles, [I remember that] I used to cut these f***ers by hand, right?

And then I got a call from one of the recruitment companies I'd written off to in the back of *Edge*, and they said, "There's a

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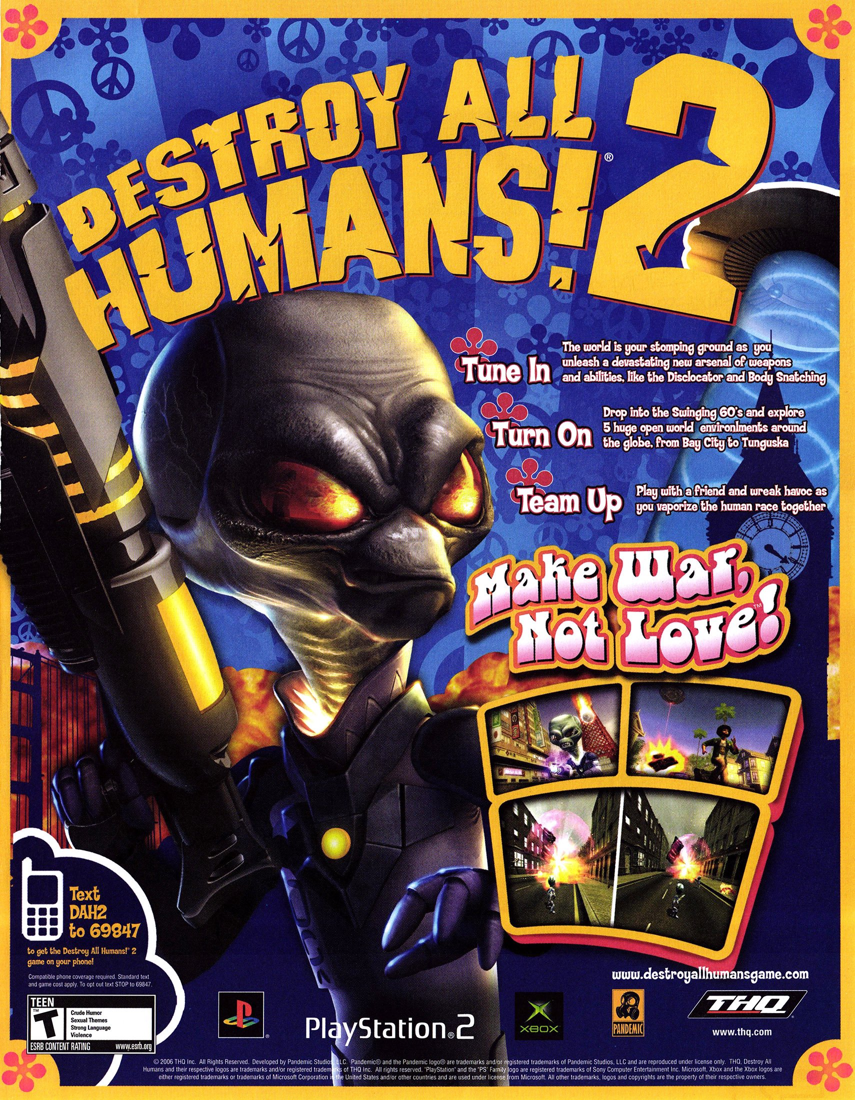

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"I WISH THERE WERE MORE PASSION ACROSS THE GAMES INDUSTRY."

job in London. Do you want to go for the interview?" The company was Acclaim, and the job was giving out the cheats for *Mortal Kombat* on the telephone. So I took it. The job paid no money, but I believed in myself. I believed I had something to offer. I walked into the office and they had MTV playing, so I thought it was a cool place to work. It was certainly cooler than any other office I'd seen.

| OPM **Better than the insurance office.**

| AW I used to go to the office every day, even on weekends, because I couldn't afford to pay the bills. So I used to go to work and play games. And the first day I went to work, I went in and cleaned the office at the end of the first day. I did all the washing up in the kitchen, and somebody came over and said, "Kid, we have cleaners to do that." But I just figured, "If it's this messy, I'll clean it up." I just figured, "I'll do everything. I'll be the best damn employee they ever had."

So kids used to ring up and say, "Can you tell me Kung Lao's fatalities on the Genesis?" And if kids wrote in about a game, I used to write back to them and send them a personal letter, saying, "Yeah, look out for this, and you should try this; this is a good game." I used to get letters from all over the world.

And then I moved into marketing, and I worked in the marketing group there. The job I eventually had at Acclaim was like the A&R guy, so I got to travel the world and visit all the developers. All the developers used to pitch games, and some of them were flat-out terrible. Everyone wants to join the games industry, and they probably should, because some of the ideas some of the developers have are just terrible.

You'd fly around the world and say, "What have you got?" And they went, "It's *FIFA* with giant insects." And then you went, "You're kidding, right?" There were all sorts of stories about people who hired an office for a day and filled it with their friends to make it look like they've got something [in development]. They'd pretend to play a QuickTime movie on a keyboard, and you'd go, "Can I play?" and they'd say, "No, no! It's not finished yet!" Classic stuff, you know? Some developers out there were not actually out to make a great game; they were out get an advance. And that's how they'd make their money.

So I traveled around the world, and I got really tired of flying. And I came out and thought, "I have a good job, but it's time to join development. What am I gonna do?" And I figured that people were going to say to me, "You've never made a game before. What do you know?" And my answer to that was, "I've never made a game, but I've played a lot of hits. And if it's my ideas or *FIFA* with insects, we can't do much worse."

I remember coming to see the Criterion guys, and I remember thinking, "These guys have got great passion and they know the technology, but they really kind of lack direction in terms of what makes a hit game and what formats they're backing." So I joined Criterion. I came in and sat down and asked, "What are we doing?" The ideas on the table were: World War II flying game like *Ace Combat*. Well, I don't really think they've heard of the [British WWII fighter] Spitfire in America, so that was off. The next option was a Bruce Lee fighting game. Well, hey, if it was the *Tekken* team, maybe. But having never done any fighting game, I think it's pretty hard. And then one of the other guys had a platform game based on vampire penguins.

| OPM **Vampire penguins?! Oh, c'mon, that's gold!**

| AW Swear to god. I remember thinking, "I've made a huge mistake. I had a really good career on the other side. I've really got this wrong. I don't know; this is just not for me." And then [Criterion] had a big deal with Midway, and they told me, "They'll do a driving game. Fly over there."

We came over there to Midway, and I knew we were in for interesting times when the producer we met said, "If I could choose between playing a videogame or a board game, I'd choose a board game any day." I'd gone there thinking, "Arcade games, this is going to be great! I love what Midway does." And the guy talked about rolling dice and all sorts of stuff.

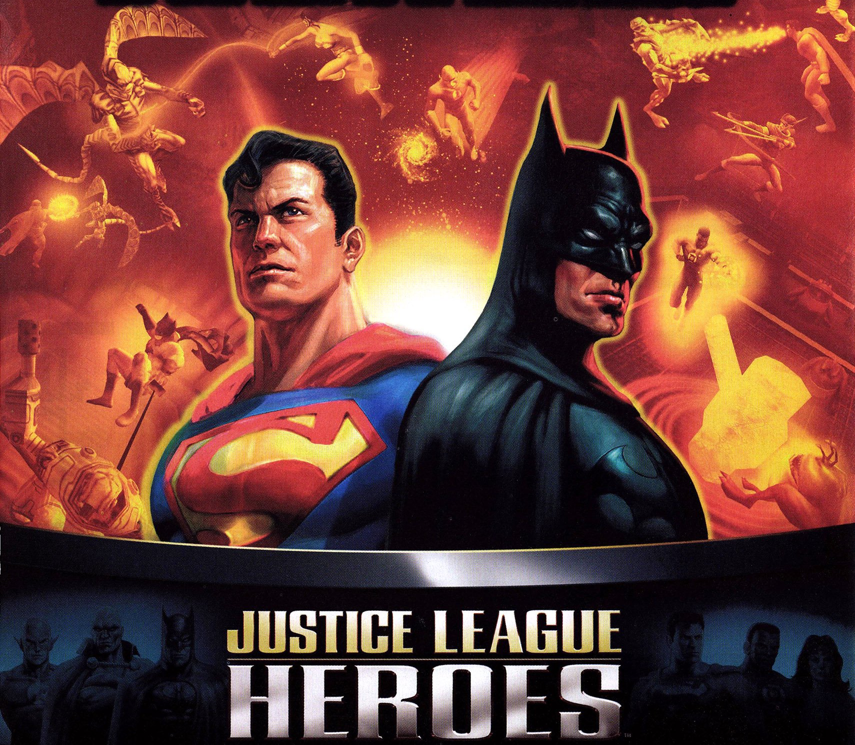
So we came back and we sat in the bar in the hotel that night, getting absolutely hosed. And I said to Chris [Roberts], who was the designer I was working with at the time, "Hey, Chris, let's make this game." And the pitch they had was this game called *Stunt Cop*; it was like *Crazy Taxi*, and you did things like deliver doughnuts for your boss and drive old cars. And I said, "What do you think of this game?" And he said, "Well, I'm not gonna buy it." And I said, "We're going to make a game, and you're the designer, and you're not going to buy it! Why are we doing that?" Everyone looked at me and said, "Well, then, what ideas have you got?" And I said, "Well, I think we'll make an arcade driving game where you crash the car."

The *Burnout* idea came from playing *OutRun*, a game where you go really fast and can crash and it looked great, and from playing 3DO *Need for Speed*. I'd remembered when my friends came around to my parents' house one Saturday night; we played 3DO *Need for Speed*, and my friend Dave took the controls, spun the Ferrari off the line like Magnum, drove ahead—everyone thought it just looked amazing—and then he hit a car head-on and flipped it. Flipped the car. And everyone cheered in the room and thought it was amazing. And then it did crash highlights. I remember thinking, "No game's doing crashing. Let's do it."

| OPM **What game that you've worked on are you proudest of?**

| AW Well, it's always the last one we've just done, really. *Revenge* 360, I think we did

NO ONE ELSE IS IN THEIR LEAGUE



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(s06)

"GOING TO THAT E3—IT WAS JUST AMAZING."

a phenomenal job. But I think, out of them, *Burnout 3*. Whereas *Burnout 2* was naked ambition, and we were just gonna take on the world, *3* was amazing because we signed it with EA and, as an independent company, anybody's lying if they're telling you that they don't want to snag EA.

So signing with EA was amazing, and then seeing it on that video wall at E3 was just like.... We'd gone to E3 every year before then, and went, "We'd kill to be there. We'd kill to be there!" And I remember the day of watching the test of it go up; we were just so excited. So going to that E3—it was just amazing. Absolutely amazing. And because we saw the PSP that year!

| OPM Where do you hope to see games go in the next 10 years?

| AW I hope they get better, for a start. I don't believe, at the moment, we're where we need to be for now. I mean, I don't think we were where we needed to be coming off the SNES and the PlayStation 1. I thought PlayStation 1 software was going to be far more spectacular than it was.

Everyone wants to come and [be a developer]. But the passion that's on the outside isn't always on the inside. EA gets attacked a lot. People think we're the evil ones; people think we're the Borg, the Evil Empire, everything. We're really not. There are certainly more people passionate about games here than most of the places I've been. Certainly, that's why I'm here. I just wish there were more passion across the whole [industry]. I wish more games were really exciting. There aren't that many hits, and I think there could be a lot more. There are lots of good ideas, and so many of them are let down.

I just hope it gets more positive. I'm a bit ground down by all the moaning: "It's hard!" or "It's everybody else's fault but my own!" You know, make a good game. We don't go and speak at conferences and stuff, because what do you say other than, "Make a good game"? I think that the rules of the game have never been easier. There's so much data out there; there's the Internet. It's never been easier to work out what the trends are and what to do.

Developers, you'll find, have never got anything good to say about anything. That's why [at Criterion] we order all the American magazines. We read gaming magazines. We want to be excited by the things we read. When we see you guys getting excited by stuff, like on the *1UP Show*, that's just inspiration for us, because then we get excited as well. You know, we want to be excited about games.

I think too many people have a distorted Internet view of the world, and the Internet's largely negative, so they're largely negative as well, and I'm just tired of that. I just want to get some big gaming love-in. I want to walk around at E3 with people saying, "Let's go and play some great games," rather than, "S***! S***!" And that's all you find, right?

Increasingly, people make their minds up on stuff really early. And I've been there as well: "It's s***! Don't play this s***!" It's amazing when you've come to play it through yourself, when you've put your money down. Developers are spoiled, I guess. They'll refuse to get the games. People play more games sometimes before they came into the industry, whereas we're pretty aware that people would kill to do this. People would do this for free! Can you believe this is a job? Are you kidding me? You guys get to play all the games before everyone else, and we're all just sitting there going, "We never want to talk about what we think is great. We always want to talk about what sucks."

| OPM So what do you think is great right now?

| AW What's great right now? What have I played that I think is really great? I've just played through *Gun* by Neversoft; I thought it was great. Thought it was absolutely great! I need to get their e-mail address and e-mail them and tell them, "Great job!"

| OPM [Neversoft president] Joel Jewett is cool. Have you met him ever?

| AW I want to meet him, because he's from Great Falls, MT. And I lived in Montana for a while, so I can understand. When I lived in Montana, I'd go, "This is great! This is like the Old West!" And all the Montana guys would go, "Hell no! You don't even know s*** about the Old West!" So if he's from Montana, that guy must have been on a mission.

| OPM Yeah, he's awesome. You should meet up with him.

| AW I'd love to meet those guys. So yeah, I played through *Gun* and finished it. Played it when it came out, and then I went back and did all the side missions, did all that last weekend. I just took two weeks off to play games every day. I've been playing *Ghost Recon* every night with [my coworkers]. I think cooperative play against AI is great, and we don't see it enough. I think that's really, really interesting.

I think the PSP is really underrated at the moment as well. I've recently been really into the PSP because I bought the LocationFree TV thing from Sony. After we saw [Sony CEO] Howard Stringer show it at [the Consumer Electronics Show], we thought it was amazing. Watching TV on the PSP is great. I just walk around and can have it on at home. I can literally be brushing my teeth, watching the news, and then walk around. You just need suction cups to stick it on your fridge or something.

That's just genuinely cool, so it really beefs me up at the moment when, I think, as you probably know, I think there's been a lot of negativity about the PlayStation 3 because a lot of people are in the dark. So it's like, "Well, we haven't seen or heard anything! It obviously all sucks!" Are you kidding? One of the things we've been talking about internally is lifting up our vibe. But when everyone sees *Ridge Racer 7*, I think all that [negativity] will go away. |

RÉSUMÉ

RÉSUMÉ

Ferrari (Unreleased)
TrickStyle (1999)
Fur Fighters (2000)
Burnout (2001)
Burnout 2: Point of Impact (2002)
Burnout 3: Takedown (2004)
Burnout Revenge (2005)
Black (2006)

SHONEN JUMP™

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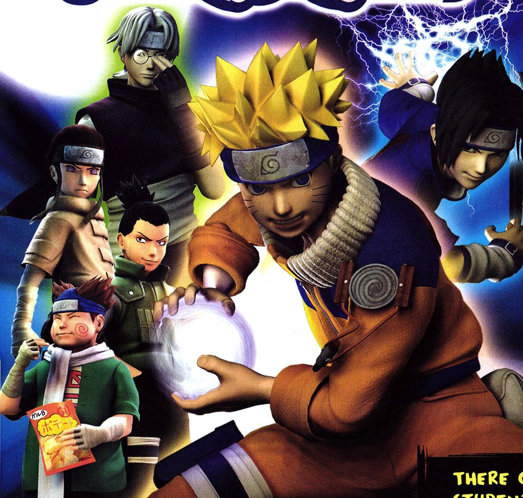
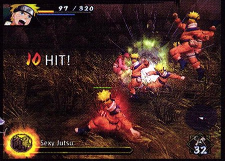
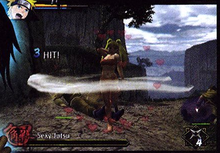


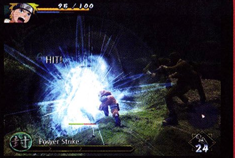
Become the Hidden Leaf Village's most notorious ninja student and work together with your team – Sasuke, Shikamaru, Neji and Choji – using their unique skills to defeat cunning and deadly enemies.


97 / 320
10 HIT!
Sexy Jutsu
32

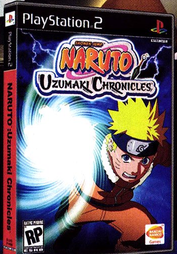
Unleash the power of the Nine-Tailed Fox Spirit, combine attacks to create new combos and perfect your skills while you strive to uncover the many secrets of the Uzumaki Chronicles™!


3 HIT!
Sexy Jutsu
4

A ninja must be cunning as well as fast and powerful. Customize Naruto's strength, stamina, special attacks and more to create new abilities that will give you the edge in battle.


95 / 100
HIT!
Power Strike
24

THERE COMES A TIME WHEN EVERY STUDENT HAS TO FACE HIS TRUE DESTINY... AND ONE NINJA'S DESTINY MAY BE THE VILLAGE'S ONLY HOPE.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PlayStation 2

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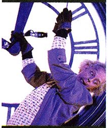
NOVEMBER 06

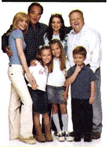
THE MONTH AHEAD FOR YOU AND YOUR PLAYSTATION

SUNDAY



12

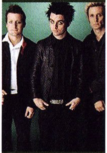
In 1955, **Hill Valley** weathermen warn of a chance for thunderstorms. Stay away from big clocks.



19

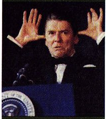
Today is **Have a Bad Day Day**. Celebrate with an *According to Jim* marathon.

MONDAY



06

The Sex Pistols play their first concert in London. Thirty years later, **Green Day** gets rich playing the same songs.



20

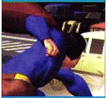
SETI is founded in 1984. Aliens retaliate by fixing presidential election.

TUESDAY

NEW GAMES

07

Holy gaming overload! Today sees the release of more games than any other day of the year, with ***Guitar Hero II, Every Extend Extra, Lumines II, Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo 2, The Sopranos***, and many, many more.



14

Superman Returns and wants to be a ***SingStar***.

21

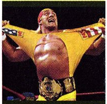
Still have spare change after last Friday's PS3 purchase? Then perhaps you would enjoy yourself some ***Sonic Rivals*** or ***College Hoops***.

NEW GAMES

WEDNESDAY

01

A trip down mammary lane: Bare-chested women make their first appearance in ***National Geographic*** in 1896.



08

It's **Cook Something Bold and Pungent Day**—we suggest a nice Hulk Hogan stew.

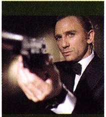
15

It's **I Love to Write Day**, a holiday only slightly more popular in schools than **I Love to Do Trigonometry Day**.

THURSDAY

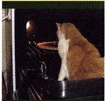
02

We see dead people: **Feliz Día de los Muertos**!



16

Will **Daniel Craig** resurrect the **Bond** franchise or kill it completely? We'll know when ***Casino Royale*** comes out tomorrow.

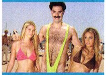


23

Save a turkey—eat a kitty.

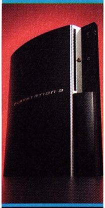
FRIDAY

NEW FLICKS



03

The Kazakhstani journalist will have his hands full as the world is exposed—literally—to ***Borat***.



17

OMG PS3!!!

24

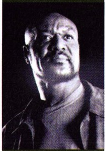
Christopher Guest's new film is in theaters ***For Your Consideration***. Consider us sold.

NEW FLICKS

SATURDAY

11

Get out the measuring tape: Today could see a record-setting line in Japan as people line up to get one of the first 100,000 PS3s.



18

Delroy Lindo, also known in the *OPM* offices as the poor man's Morgan Freeman, turns 54.

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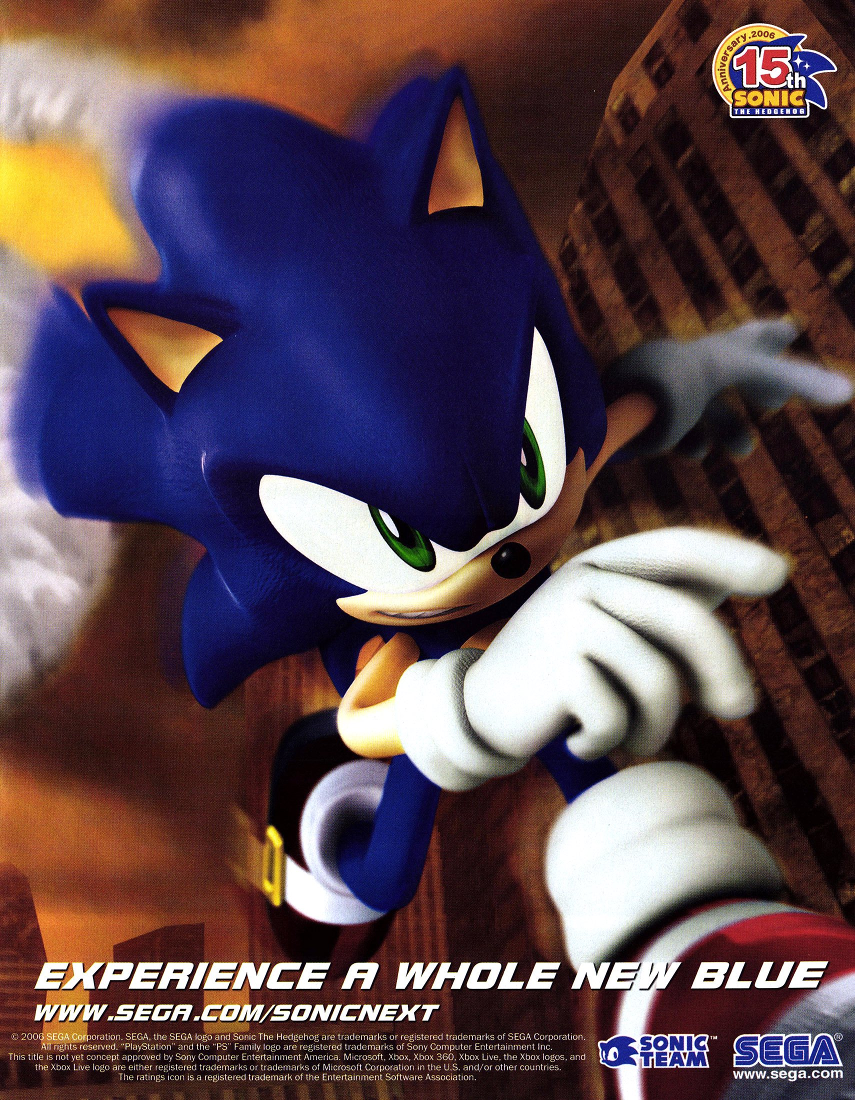
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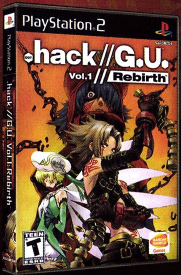

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THE ELDER SCROLLS IV

OBLIVION

THE SECRET WEAPON OF THE PS3 LAUNCH REVEALED!

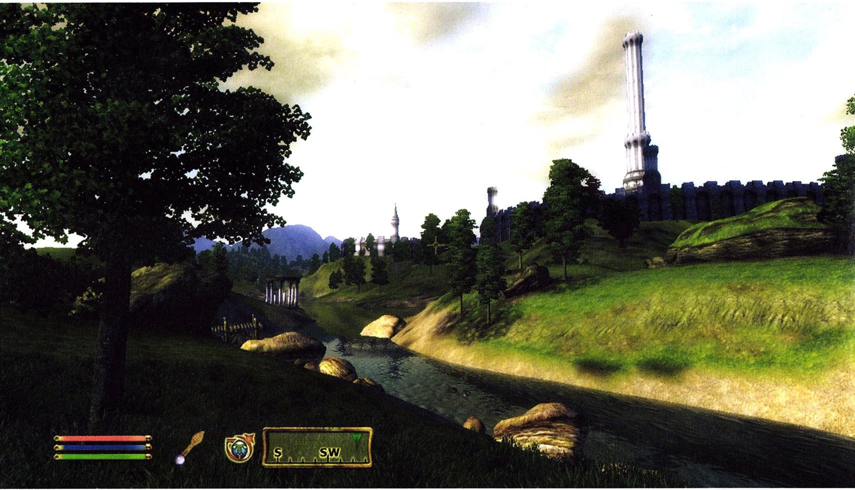
by JOE RYBICKI

You are standing at the exit of the vast system of sewers that underlies Imperial City, the central metropolis of the province of Cyrodiil. You've just spent the last half hour escaping from a cell in the Imperial City dungeon, watching the assassination of your emperor, and fending off giant rats and shambling zombies. Coming out into the afternoon sunlight, you stand on a gentle slope down to the water's edge. In front of you is a crumbling ruin, beautiful in its antiquity. Behind you is the sprawling mass of Imperial City. You see an expansive countryside rolling up to densely forested mountains.

The question is, what do you do now?

The answer: Whatever you want. Because this is *Oblivion*, the fourth game in the 12-year-old *Elder Scrolls* series, and your path through the game is limited only by your imagination. This enormous, multimillion-selling role-playing game has been an unstoppable powerhouse on both the Xbox 360 and the PC since its launch in March. And come November, an expanded version will launch alongside the PS3.

This is a very big deal.



WHAT IS OBLIVION?

ANOTHER LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD

Even if you don't own a 360 or a high-end PC, chances are you've at least heard of *Oblivion*. The RPG has been winning awards all over the world, starting with editors'-choice or game-of-the-month honors in virtually every outlet it's been reviewed in, and going on to win Game of the Year, Best Role-Playing Game, and Best-Looking Game at G4's 2006 G-Phoria awards. *PC Gamer UK* even gave it the top spot in the magazine's "Top 100 Games Ever" feature.

But what is it that makes *Oblivion* so special? In a word: freedom. "It's the game where you get to live another life in another world," says Todd Howard, executive producer for *Oblivion* at developer Bethesda Softworks. "Conjure up in your mind who you want to be in an epic fantasy world; this is a game where you get to make that person, and then go do whatever you want. *The Elder Scrolls* hearkens back to that pen-and-paper experience. I think a lot of PlayStation people are used to 'open world' meaning *Grand Theft Auto*...but I think if you play this, you'll see an open world to the nth degree."

Lest you think this is just idle talk, allow us to drop some numbers on you. See, *Oblivion* is big—*really* big. When you consider the main quest, the quest lines of the primary "factions" or guilds, and all the unrelated quests you may come across, there are over *200* individual quests. Want to know how that translates into playtime?

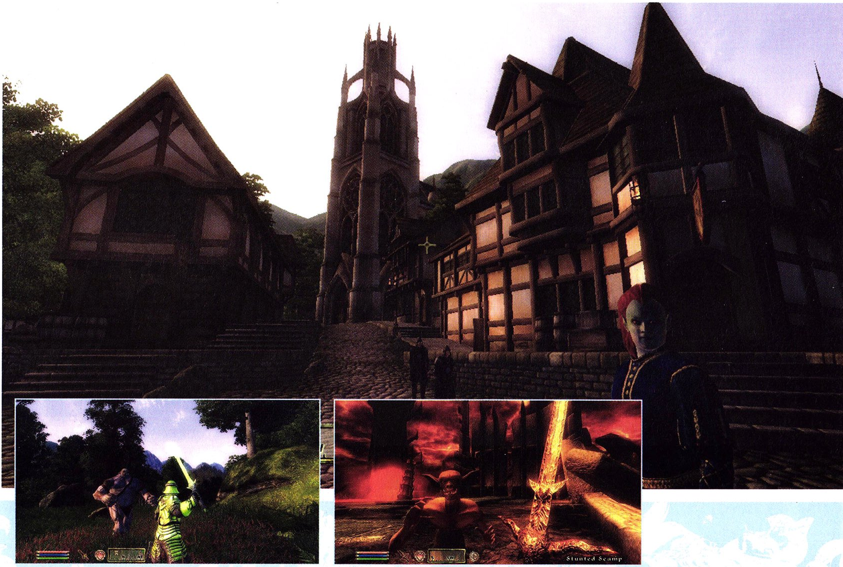
"We usually view gameplay as an hour per quest," Howard says. "So we usually say there's 200 hours of gameplay. But if you were to do everything in *Oblivion*, it's probably like five, six hundred hours. That almost sounds too crazy, like no one would believe you, but there are also over 200 dungeons. And only maybe 20 to 30 percent of those are included in the quests."

There are over 400 unique locations within the 16 square miles of Cyrodiil, locations that range in size from small woodland cottages or roadside inns to vast, multilevel dungeons. You may be wondering how you could possibly visit all of these locations. Really, you probably won't. This is part of the beauty of the game, knowing that with this enormous world to explore, there may be an entirely undiscovered location just around the bend. This sense of exploration and adventure is one of *Oblivion*'s most striking feats.

Creating that sense of wonder was a constant goal for the team. "We spent a lot of time working on the opening view," says Howard by way of example. "We intentionally keep it dark, and you're inside for a while, and then there's that opening of the curtain when you come out." Moving suddenly from the fairly standard—albeit quite pretty—dungeon-crawl of the first half hour or so into a vast, open world is undeniably striking. "At first, it feels like the kind of game you've already played. You're checking out the stats and controls, and it seems pretty deep, but it's still corridors and rats and zombies. And then, all of a sudden, it's—" Howard mimics opening a curtain while imitating an angelic chorus. "And you're like, 'Are you f***ing serious?'"

But this openness isn't mere window dressing; it extends into every facet of the game. "This is the game where you get to become a warrior and go save the world," Howard says, "or become the most evil assassin anyone's ever seen and kill the world—and everyone in between."

"The thing that most folks seem to latch onto," says Pete Hines, Bethesda's director of marketing and public relations, "is the



idea that they get to define what the game is, that you have no idea what's going to happen, and it's entirely up to you to define. Do you want to play a save-the-world game? Or do you just want to dungeon-crawl and kill stuff and get better loot and just be a total badass with lots of houses and a stable full of horses? The ability to have an experience that's totally defined by you, and nobody else tells you where to go—the ability to go at your own pace, even to get distracted—is great to get people talking about it. You've been playing the game for 30 hours, and he's been playing the game for 30 hours, and you've seen and done almost nothing the same."

When Hines talks about "an experience totally defined by you," he means it. When you begin *Oblivion*, you create your own character, choosing different combinations of the game's 10 races, eight attributes, 21 skills, and 13 birthsigns, and then customizing your appearance on top of that. Each of these choices has a very real effect on gameplay; each race and birthsign confers unique bonuses, for example, and your choice of race will even affect how nonplayer characters relate to you. That is, some races within the *Elder Scrolls* world of Tamriel are prejudiced against others. It's a complex world.

But let's look at some examples of how the game's direction is affected by your most basic choices. Let's say you elect to play as a straightforward magic user. You'll spend a lot of time in the Mages Guild, hunting down artifacts, assisting in research, and creating your own spells and enchanted weapons in the center of magical research, the Arcane University. Much of your combat will take place at a distance, using projectile spells and summoned creatures to do your dirty work.

But perhaps you're more interested in a little more hands-on approach. You might create a stealthy thief character instead, in which case you might choose to join the Thieves Guild, generating your income by picking locks, looting houses, and selling the stolen goods to guild fences. You'd avoid combat when possible by sneaking around in the shadows, and when you did engage an enemy, you'd always try for the damage bonuses that accompany a sneak attack.

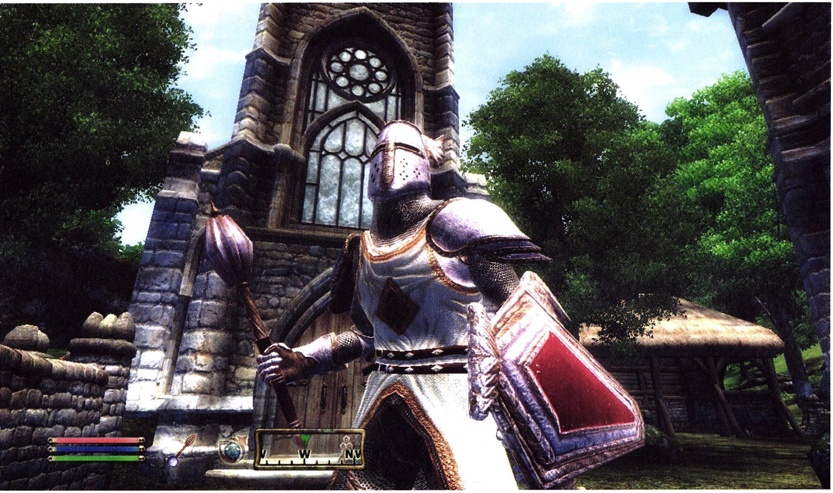
If you're interested in a darker approach, you could even elect to become an assassin: Join the Dark Brotherhood and spend your days taking out contracted targets for lucrative cash and serious loot. Or, hey, you could always become a vampire and revel in your newfound night vision and enhanced strength and speed.

Did we mention it's a complex world? And of course, these examples don't even touch on the epic central story of *Oblivion*. In quick summary, the story involves a murdered emperor, a hidden heir, and a shockingly powerful Daedric Prince (read: demon) named Mehrunes Dagon, who launches an invasion on Tamriel by opening gates to the hellish Planes of Oblivion. Your mission: Find the heir, close the gates, and put a stop to Dagon's invasion. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It's not; the main quest alone will likely take around 20 hours to complete...and it's only one-tenth of the whole game.

"AN EXPERIENCE THAT'S TOTALLY DEFINED BY YOU."

DIGITAL CRACK

"You'll notice that once you find something, we're always hinting at the next thing," says Howard. "Whenever you find a dungeon, usually there's another one on your compass. And it's rare that we leave you with an empty quest log. It's always a 'don't put the game down, one-more-turn' kind of thing. There's always a skill that's just about to go up, so do you really want to stop?"



WHAT'S NEW FOR THE PS3?

MORE THAN A PORT

Up to this point, all the features and details we've been talking about apply to the 360 and PC versions of *Oblivion*. But in order to make the PS3 version the "best version of *Oblivion* that there is," in Howard's words, Bethesda is adding an entirely new quest line—an extra 10 to 20 hours of completely new gameplay for the PS3 audience.

"*Oblivion* has these really good character archetypes for evil," Howard says. "It has the Dark Brotherhood: You get your outfit, you feel like an assassin, you feel like an evil guy, you roleplay like an evil guy. We don't have the opposite end of that. There's very little reward for being a goody two-shoes. So what we've done for the PS3 is create what we call a minifaction called the Knights of the Nine."

In the Knights of the Nine, your goal is to become the modern incarnation of an ancient force of good, a holy crusader who helped protect the land from an evil faction led by the powerful Umaril. The primary quests revolve around retrieving the Crusader's Relics, exceptionally powerful bits of armor and weaponry. Without spoiling too many of the details, we can tell you that these armaments carry unique enchantments appropriate for a "warrior-priest" or paladin archetype. And in the words of Knights of the Nine producer Jeff Gardiner, it's "some of the best gear in the game."

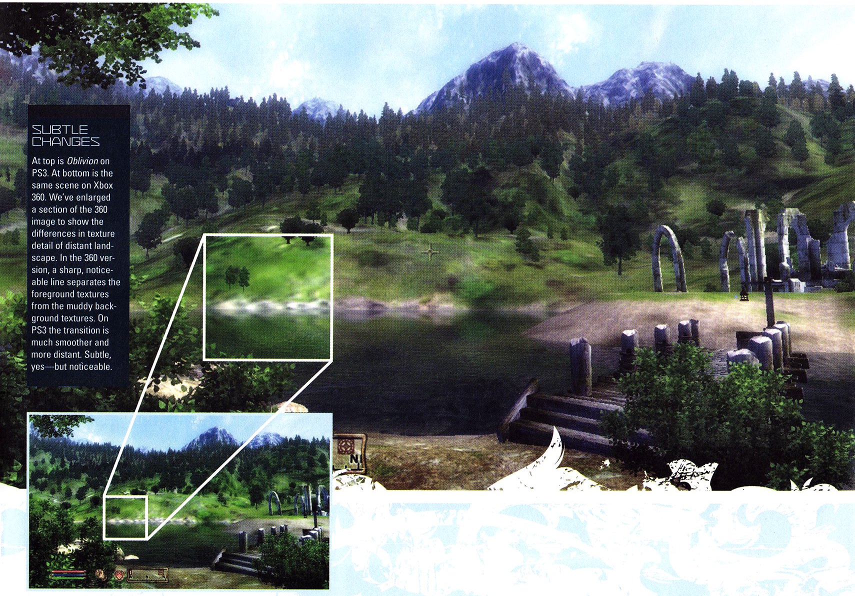
But this is not one of the easier quest lines in *Oblivion*. "We designed [the quests] to be a bit more hardcore," Howard says. "They take a little more thought; there's more adventure-game elements in there."

Gardiner agrees. "There are lots of different things you can do: puzzles, a lot of dialogue—and in some, you have to solve mysteries. We tried to pace it so that, while you are doing dungeon-crawls, not every aspect of it is a dungeon-crawl. It's layered really well."

As an example of those higher standards, to simply join the Knights of the Nine and begin the quest line, you must first embark on a lengthy pilgrimage across Cyrodiil (which is, remember, around 16 virtual square miles of countryside). The goal: to visit shrines dedicated to each of Tamriel's nine gods...shrines that don't show up on the otherwise painstakingly detailed in-game map. Once you've completed the pilgrimage, you can begin hunting for those precious relics. As you collect these relics, you can equip them instantly and enjoy their bonuses right away—but you can use them only as long as you remain on the path of good. Commit a crime, and the consequences are dire.

"If you get infamy at any time," Gardiner says, "you will lose the ability to wear the armor, and you'll have to do the pilgrimage again. You'll have to visit nine wayshrines to lower your infamy back to zero. So there is a penalty for being bad. We really wanted to make you *want* to be good. That's why we put a higher barrier of entry; that's why we make you do the pilgrimage at first. We don't want you running around and killing people; you have to choose."

To be clear, there are gradients of crimes in *Oblivion*. "It's not like you steal one flowerpot and you're screwed," continues Gardiner. "It takes a murder to gain an infamy point, or a lot of smaller crimes. We wanted some pen-



SUBTLE CHANGES

At top is *Oblivion* on PS3. At bottom is the same scene on Xbox 360. We've enlarged a section of the 360 image to show the differences in texture detail of distant landscape. In the 360 version, a sharp, noticeable line separates the foreground textures from the muddy background textures. On PS3 the transition is much smoother and more distant. Subtle, yes—but noticeable.

alty, but we're aiming more at the guy who's killing people. Of course, like most things in our game, you can always choose to come back to the good side. We'll forgive you."

Make no mistake: This PS3 content is much more than an add-on pack of new errands. "As opposed to adding content that allowed your character to just experience new quests," Howard tells us, "we wanted to create something that allowed your character to *become something new*." Along with the personal development, this new quest line introduces new enemies, new characters, and new locations.

One of the most interesting of these new locations is the ancestral home of the Knights of the Nine. This small settlement (technically a priory, as your order is of a religious nature) is a crumbling ruin when you first find it. But as you progress through the story line and word of your good deeds spreads across Cyrodiil, you'll encounter characters who wish to join your newly reestablished order. As you recruit these knights, they will travel to the priory and begin rebuilding. Where once there were cobwebs and broken furniture, you'll find beautiful stained glass and other fine trappings. Where there was barren ground, you'll find gardens and flowerbeds. And where there was a crumbling forge, you'll find a working armory with a particularly useful characteristic.

"Once you finish the quest," says Gardiner, "you can bring [the relics] back [to the priory], and there will be a blacksmith there who will repair them for free and also upgrade them to your level. So, unlike other gear, where you'll get it at level 1 and it's useless by level 10, you can actually come back here and have it tuned for your level. So it's useful for the whole game."

"WE REALLY WANTED TO MAKE YOU WANT TO BE GOOD."

Aside from this new content, you might be wondering if the PS3 version of *Oblivion* sports any technical improvements over the 360 version. The answer: sort of. "It has a lot of technical niceties," Howard says, "just [as a result of] the development time. One of the things that always bothered us was how the distant landscape looked. You'd get this very perceptible line of where stuff is loaded and where it's not loaded, and then it pops in. On the PS3, it's a lot more seamless. We did some new shaders for how it takes information from the background to the foreground and blends all that together. It's a slightly cleaner image." The results are subtle, but noticeable.

But what about more sweeping changes to things like animation, textures, or basic gameplay? Turns out, the team wasn't interested in rebuilding the game from the ground up. "That's the game we want to have out there," Howard says emphatically. "It's *Oblivion*. It's *Oblivion* on the PC, it's *Oblivion* on the 360, it's *Oblivion* on the PS3. Even if we had the ability to, for instance, redo all the art, I wouldn't want to do that. That's *Oblivion*; that's the art; that's how it looks."

ARENA, AGAIN

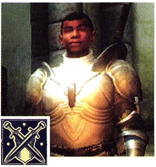
One of the minor quest lines in *Oblivion* hearkens back to the first *Elder Scrolls* game, pitting your character against an ever-more-powerful lineup of enemies in a gladiatorial arena. If you work your way all the way up the ranks, citizens will hail you as the arena champion as you pass by on the streets. Not into the fisticuffs yourself? You can still participate in the arena by betting on matches.

CHOOSE YOUR PATH

THE FACTIONS OF CYRODIIL

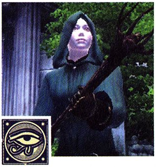
The world of *Oblivion* on PS3 will have five primary "factions," or guilds, to support the five general styles of play: fighter, mage, thief, assassin, and now crusader. While some of these have specific qualifications for applicants—for example, you may not join the Mages Guild if the law has placed a bounty on your head—as long as you meet those qualifications, you can join any faction no matter what discipline your character specializes in.

The significant thing about these factions is that each one carries its own extensive quest line. Each of these quest lines comprise around 20 different quests (with the exception of the Knights of the Nine, which has around 12 longer quests), many of which go *far* beyond the "retrieve this artifact" or "kill that monster" type. And they all offer such significant character-advancement possibilities that completing any of the quest lines makes it easier to complete the main quest—and, in some cases, also makes it significantly easier to complete the quest lines of the other guilds.



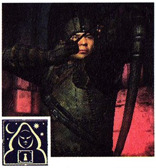
FIGHTERS GUILD

Mirroring the straightforward nature of the all-brawn, no-brains fighter stereotype, the Fighters Guild is the simplest of the five factions. Quests feature basic security and protection work, some general monster-extermination, and basically lots and lots of hack-n-slash. In other words, if there's a job in Cyrodiil that requires big muscles and a somewhat intimidating nature, you're likely to be the one to do it. Obviously, this guild is the best fit for a hand-to-hand-combat-oriented character.



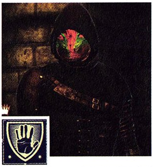
MAGES GUILD

Progressing in the Mages Guild requires a bit more effort than the Fighters Guild, but the rewards are a bit higher as well. In this guild, you'll find yourself collecting ingredients and rare magical artifacts, dabbling in magical politics, and crafting spells, potions, and magical weapons. Though the guild is a no-brainer for the straightforward mage character, any player who plans to use magic at all will benefit from joining the Mages Guild, especially for the guild's access to the altars of spellmaking and weapon enchantment.



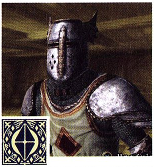
THIEVES GUILD

Walking the line between good and evil is the Thieves Guild, which requires its members to abide by a strict code of honor as they lift priceless items from under the noses of important personages. Follow the path of the thief, and you'll find yourself in all sorts of unlikely places at all hours of the night. You'll spend time skulking in shadows and secret passages. But you'll make an awful lot of money doing it. Any player interested in *Oblivion*'s surprisingly robust stealth engine should consider joining the Thieves Guild.



DARK BROTHERHOOD

The path of the assassin is widely considered to be the finest quest line in the game, but it requires a serious commitment to, well, evil. As you rise through the ranks of the Dark Brotherhood, you may find yourself excluded from more upright endeavors (like, for example, getting your wounds healed at Cyrodiil's many chapels). But the rewards are many: Not only do you get one of the most intricate story lines and missions in the game, you also get some really killer loot. As in the Thieves Guild, you'll spend lots of time in the shadows—but here, you'll also spend time setting up elaborate schemes for taking out your targets. And here, things always end badly for somebody.



KNIGHTS OF THE NINE

As described in the previous section, the Knights of the Nine are essentially the polar opposites of the Dark Brotherhood. Dedicated to upholding the tenets of the Nine Divines, the Knights require an unflinching dedication to the forces of good. As in real life, this is not an easy path. But the thoughtful, adventure-style quests are rewarding in themselves, and the benefits of being a member in good standing of the Knights are truly powerful. This expansive quest line has been described by producer Jeff Gardiner as "the 'good' Dark Brotherhood."

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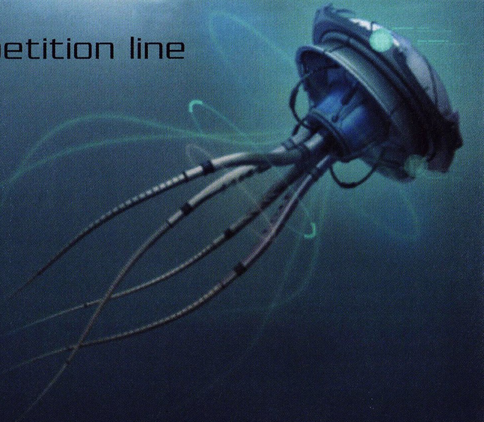

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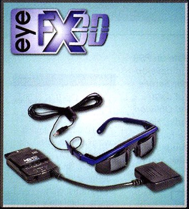

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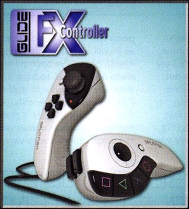
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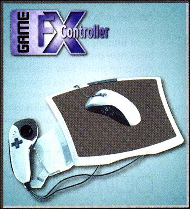
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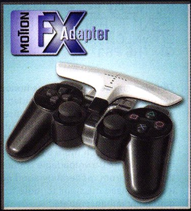
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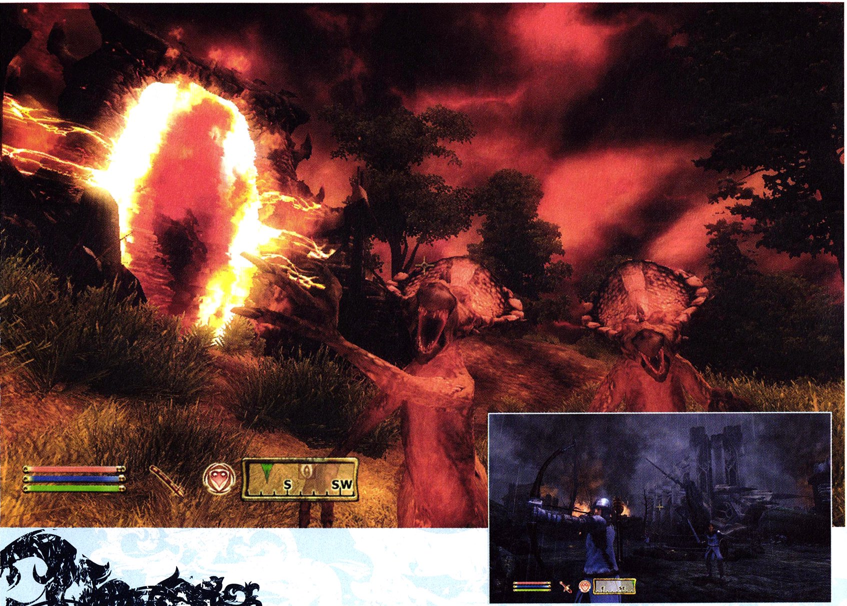


WHEN BIG JUST ISN'T BIG ENOUGH

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT ON THE PS3?

Oblivion **enjoyed the dubious honor** of being the first game to offer downloadable expansions on the Xbox 360. The practice started with the minimalist Horse Armor pack (priced at a message-board-inflaming $2.50) and moved on to much more substantial offerings. Now the downloadable content runs the gamut from moderately sized quests and location-based missions to more fundamental gameplay enhancements.

With Bethesda being at the forefront of this next-gen download movement, we wondered what the plans were for the PS3. Will the PS3 version include the downloadable content released so far? And how is Sony handling downloads on the new system?

"The PS3 version does not come with the downloadable content in it," Howard says. "We hope to have that available as downloadable content on the PS3. But right now, to be brutally honest, it's very fuzzy. It's very fuzzy how the network works, how we put things up there, how it gets into the game. That may be clarified before launch...but it might not be. So we can't say today that there will be downloadable content on PS3, and that it'll be there on day one. Do we want to do it? Oh, hell yeah."

In other words, as of this writing, the full details of the PS3's network infrastructure still have not been communicated to developers. So we turn to hypotheticals: Would Bethesda like to see *Oblivion*'s downloadable content on the PS3 handled similarly to the 360? "I'd like to," says Howard, "but I honestly don't know if that's going to happen. I hope it happens. But it is not as clear on this date on PS3 as it was on 360 at [the same time in development]. But we've been building *Elder Scrolls*, since *Morrowind*, to have the kind of data structures we can add stuff to easily. *Oblivion* PS3 is made to work with [downloads]. How they get there is fuzzy. It may not be fuzzy by the time this issue comes out; as things roll up to launch, things move very, very fast. You're locking down stuff everywhere...which is something that we're probably more comfortable with than we should be, because we're always doing—for better or worse—big, crazy s*** for big, crazy hardware that isn't out yet. That's our standard operating procedure."

"WE HAD TO BEND OVER FOR DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT."

On the subject of downloads, we couldn't resist asking what these vanguards of downloadable content thought of Microsoft's new

WILL OBLIVION GO ONLINE?

"It is the No. 1 request we get, to be able to play co-op," says Howard, "but it would de-focus us from the main thrust of the game. I definitely can see the joy in at least being able to fight your friends. I think a lot of people want to beat each other up more than adventure together: 'Ha-ha, I beat you. Now I get to take one of your items.' I think that would be a lot of fun."

“consumables” venture. If you haven’t been following this development, allow us to summarize: The next version of Xbox Live will allow gamemakers to sell items that can break or be used up. Consider paying real money for in-game armor that eventually degrades and disappears. We wanted to know if the *Oblivion* team would be interested in this kind of content delivery method.

“I honestly think that’s absolutely abysmal,” Howard says. “I think it’s a horrible idea. It cuts against the grain of what I think games should be. I think downloads are stuff that we make when we’re done; they’re stuff we think would be a cool addition. Whereas consumables are, like, pay-for-cheating? I dunno. People have downloaded our stuff, but to be honest, I think charging for [even] gamer pics is exploitative.”

“I could argue the other side, though,” he muses. “In *Oblivion*, if we let you download gold into the game—which I find offensive, but the people who find it offensive won’t buy it—and the people who want it because they want to do something like buy a house and they just want to experience it...well, is there anything wrong with that? I’ll say this about it: We’ll let someone else try it. We had to bend over for downloadable content, to see how everyone felt about that. We’ll let someone else bend over for [this] one.”

One thing is certain: We can expect downloadable content for as long as people are interested in the game. “We have a number of [things] in terms of downloads going now,” Howard says. “It’s definitely going to go through the end of this year, and probably early next year. It’s kind of up in the air. We’d like to keep doing them until the consumers say, ‘All right—we’re full, thanks.’ And then a few will come out we were working on, ’cause we’re always working on something. Because the initial game has a lot of gameplay, people play it for a while. We’ve found, looking at how many people are continuing to play *Oblivion*, that is stays pretty big on a daily basis. It’s a huge number. They’re staying with the game, so we can offer them things, and there will be enough people playing to make it worthwhile.”

THE EXPANDED OBLIVION

ADD-ONS AND DOWNLOADS SO FAR

As of this writing, Bethesda has released seven different bits of downloadable content on the 360 and PC. Once the PS3’s downloadable-content delivery system is finalized, we can expect to see all of these available for the PS3.

HORSE ARMOR Pretty much what it says on the tin: It puts fancy armor on your horse, protecting your noble steed from attacks by unsavory elements.

ORRERY Retrieve the pieces of the Imperial Orrery (a sort of three-dimensional planetarium) and gain access to a new area in Imperial City. Completing the quest also grants your character special powers based on the phases of Tamriel’s moons.

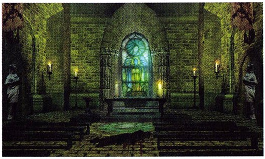
WIZARD’S TOWER This downloadable structure features many bonuses for the magic-user, including a garden for growing alchemical ingredients, a laboratory that boosts your alchemy skill, and the ability to teleport to any Mages Guild location in Cyrodiil.

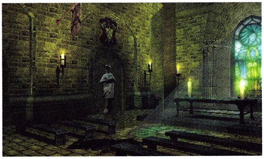
THE THIEVES DEN This location-based quest opens up an underground lair to serve as a base of operations for your less-legal pursuits. It unlocks 45 new items, 15 new spells, and a staff of pirates to do your bidding.

MEHRUNE’S RAZOR This one features an entirely new dungeon and accompanying quest. Along the way you’ll encounter 17 new magical items, including the titular one-hit-kill dagger.

THE VILE LAIR This one’s most beneficial to truly evil characters. It includes a “cattle pen” to allow vampires easy access to human blood, a dark shrine to cure diseases (since regular chapels won’t cure evil characters), and the Font of Renewal, which cures characters of vampirism altogether.

SPELL TOMES The most recently released download adds a new type of treasure to the game: spell books. Without this download, the only way to learn new spells is to buy them from vendors or make your own. Spell Tomes allows magic users to find new spells just as easily as they would new weapons, armor, potions, or scrolls.





A WORLD IN YOUR POCKET

HANDS-ON WITH OBLIVION PSP

After all this time we've spent talking about what a huge game *Oblivion* is, the idea of it coming to a handheld system may sound faintly ridiculous. But the rumors are true: *The Elder Scrolls Travels: Oblivion* will arrive on the PSP sometime in 2007.

How on earth does Bethesda plan to squeeze this enormous game onto a handheld? "We don't," Howard says. "The PSP version of *Oblivion* is a very different game with a different story line. It's a dungeon adventure game with 10 large levels. So it has that experience of the dungeon romp. It doesn't have wide-open, wander-the-landscape kind of stuff. We want to concentrate on what we can pull off really well."

"We want to get the feel right," elaborates Laffy Taylor, producer of *Travels*, "but it can't be one-for-one with the 360 or PS3 version. It needs to feel like a handheld game, so it's going to be a little more hack-n-slashy, button-mashy. It has to be, because you're not using the analog triggers to do your blocks and attacks. This is more of a dungeon-crawler than *Oblivion*; you'll be exploring these underground areas, and also Oblivion planes that'll be very much like [the console version of] *Oblivion*."

So while the setting will be more restrictive and the controls, by necessity, will be simplified, the fundamental gameplay will be strikingly similar to the original game. "You'll be able to create your own character, look at your character, and it'll update live when you change your equipment," Taylor says. "We have 18 out of the 21 original skills from *Oblivion*; the only ones we removed are the ones that didn't really apply for our story line or gameplay. And you have all the core attributes and perks; all that stuff is still there. That functionality is all parallel."

> "THE PSP VERSION OF OBLIVION IS A VERY DIFFERENT GAME."

The result is a game that very much has that *Oblivion* feel. In our hands-on time with a *very* early version, we found the indoor environments richly detailed, and while the controls took some getting used to, the core gameplay was all present and accounted for. In short, all reason to the contrary, *Travels* really does feel like a portable *Oblivion*.

Unfortunately, what we'd consider a no-brainer feature for the PSP version is proving impossible due to timing: *Travels* is not expected to feature any connectivity with the PS3 version. While the idea of being able to take your painstakingly crafted PS3 character on the road with you is incredibly compelling, it's not possible to implement, since the PSP version is releasing so much later than the PS3 version. "It's difficult to retrofit that functionality," laments Taylor. "I know that Sony is keen on that kind of stuff happening, but the timing isn't going to work out for us."

Still: portable *Oblivion*. That certainly counts for something.

CONTROL FREAKS

The designers of *Travels* cite *Metroid Prime* as an influence on the control scheme: The analog stick controls front-and-back movement and turning side to side, holding down the L button allows your character to strafe, and holding down the R button engages free-look. Unfortunately, the controls are too complex to allow for the elegant *Syphon Filter*–style control scheme.

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THE LEGACY
THE SECRET OF OBLIVION'S SUCCESS

In these pages, we've discussed all the individual components that make *Oblivion* a game unlike any other. We've talked about what new features the designers are bringing to the PS3. We've mused on how digital delivery has changed—and will continue to change—this game in particular and games in general. But the question still remains: What is it about this one role-playing game that has made it such a staggering success?

And it is a staggering success. While Bethesda does not divulge specific numbers, they were able to give us a general idea. "We shipped, initially, 1.7 million units," says Howard. "Put it this way: It's had a *lot* of reorders, so it's well, well, well beyond that. It's sold *really* well." (As of this writing, the game has been out less than six months.)

But what is it about the game that so captures people's interest? Howard offers us an example. "There was this guy who was writing a story in *Atlantic Monthly*," he says, "a very highbrow, deep-thinking magazine. The guy doesn't play games, but he says, 'Videogames are really popular. I want to see what this is about. I'm going to write an article.' At the time he started writing it, *Oblivion* had just come out, so he goes into a store and says, 'Hey, what's the big videogame I should be playing?' And he came by at E3 and said, 'I started playing this thing.... It's the greatest thing I've ever experienced. I cannot believe how awesome it is. I can't stop playing it. I love it. I tell everybody about it.'

"This goes back to that sense of wonder," Howard concludes. "The reason why the game finds an audience larger than other games is that people can discuss it before it comes out, and it's whatever they want it to be. When you discuss *Oblivion*, there's no barrier to it."

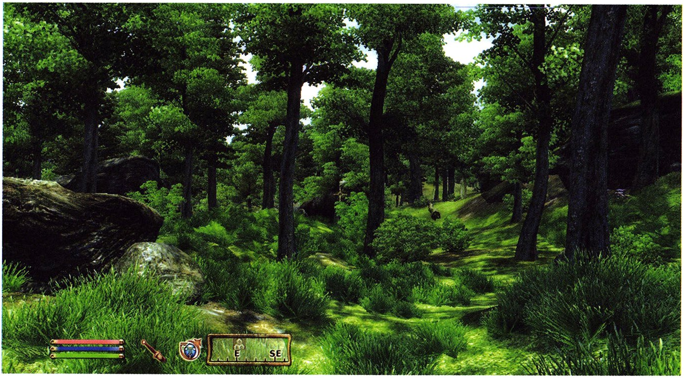
But even more significant is this: When you're talking about the game, if you ask, "I wonder if I can...?" the answer is frequently, "Yes. You *can*." Can you make your own spells, potions, and weapons? Yes, you can; by mixing different enchantments, you can create literally millions of spell variants. Can you harvest crops, hunt deer, pick flowers? Yes, you can; as with spellcrafting, you can mix the various ingredients that can result from these activities to create millions of different variants of potions. Can you buy a house, ride a horse, read a book? Yes, you can; the game has eight houses for sale, seven different types of horses, and over 400 books—a quarter of which actually *teach you something*, permanently boosting a specific in-game skill.

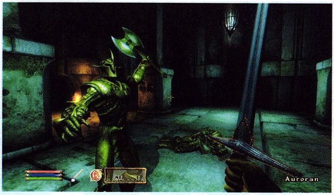
It's like a massively multiplayer RPG in its scope, except it's all yours to explore. And that, really, is the fundamental joy of this game: exploration. We've thrown around the figure of 16 square miles of countryside a few times already...but understand that this figure is only *exterior* space. Add in the 200 dungeons and the various other interior spaces, and you're likely to end up with a figure approaching almost double that. You can play this game for literally *hundreds* of hours and still come across entirely new areas on a regular basis.

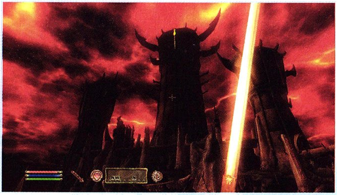
And it certainly doesn't hurt that these areas look so damn *pretty*. As Howard says, "We like graphics. I don't apologize for it; I

THE GOOD STUFF

Oblivion includes 15 level-restricted Daedric quests, which involve running errands for the demonic (though not always evil per se) forces of Tamriel. The rewards for these sometimes grueling quests are some really exceptional artifacts. Our favorite is the Wabbajack, a staff that transforms its target into a random creature—sometimes weaker, sometimes much more powerful.







POSTCARDS FROM YOUR OTHER LIFE

Far left: The ghosts of the ancient Knights of the Nine put you on the path to sainthood. Left: Yes, this is a real screenshot. Yes, the game really does look this good. Lower left: The Aurorans, servants of Umaril, are among the new enemies in the PS3 version. Lower right: The central tower in one of the Oblivion planes. Your job is to get to the top and remove a key artifact.

love them. They make me like a game more. That sense of wonder goes up astronomically with pretty pictures. We like pretty pictures. And because of that, it brings more people to the party. They see a picture of it and say, 'I'd play that. I don't play role-playing games, but that looks like something I would play.'"

But understand that *Oblivion* is a very different game from the largely linear console RPGs with which you may be most familiar. This is not a game about an orphan discovering her hidden identity as the prophesied savior of the universe; this is not a coming-of-age story about a plucky farmer's son finding his true destiny. Unlike most console RPGs, the story—while certainly important—is not the reason for the game's existence. Instead, as in the pen-and-paper games from which the genre takes its name, in *Oblivion*, you create your *own* story. You decide who you want to be. You decide where you want to go.

This is no hyperbole. If you choose to live a peaceful, idyllic life, roaming the countryside picking berries and mushrooms and mixing them into potions, you can do that. Given enough time, you can even make enough gold selling those potions to retire in comfort to the game's most luxurious estate.

And if you choose to literally slaughter every single person you come across, soaking the berry-strewn countryside in innocent blood, you can do that too. You'll have to keep an eye out for guards, of course, but it's technically possible...not to mention lucrative. (Oh, and *evil*.)

And if one day you get tired of the berry-picking or peasant-killing and decide to go save the world, you can do that, too. You can take your finely honed alchemy or combat skills and put them to a more philanthropic use. You might suffer at first due to your drastic skill specialization, but the game is designed to help you compensate for such shortcomings of character.

"I LOVE GRAPHICS. THEY MAKE ME LIKE A GAME MORE."

The point is, the game supports wildly different play styles. No two people playing *Oblivion* will have the same experience; in fact, it's entirely possible for two people playing *Oblivion* to have almost *completely different* experiences for the first, oh, 50 hours or so. (And take our word for it: Comparing notes with other players is half the fun.) Can you think of another game you could say the same thing about?

Oblivion is already the stuff of legend. It's already made a huge splash in the industry, with ripples only just beginning to be felt. For those with a sense of adventure, it's an incomparable wealth of exploration and wonder. It's a remarkable feat of game design.

And when the PS3 launches, an expanded, refined version of *Oblivion* will launch right alongside it. And with is enormous world, gorgeous graphics, and near-unending gameplay, if any single game is worth the entry price of the PS3...well, *Oblivion* is it. ▮

SOUND FAMILIAR?

In *Oblivion*, the emperor of Tamriel is voiced by Patrick Stewart (Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). His long-lost heir is played by Sean Bean (Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*). And the game's primary antagonist is voiced by Terence Stamp (General Zod in *Superman II*). Also, many of the female characters are voiced by Lynda Carter (TV's *Wonder Woman*).

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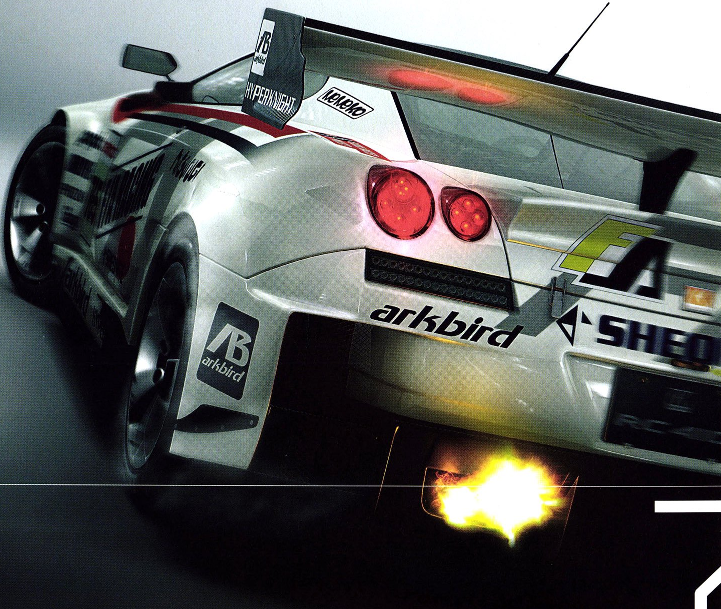
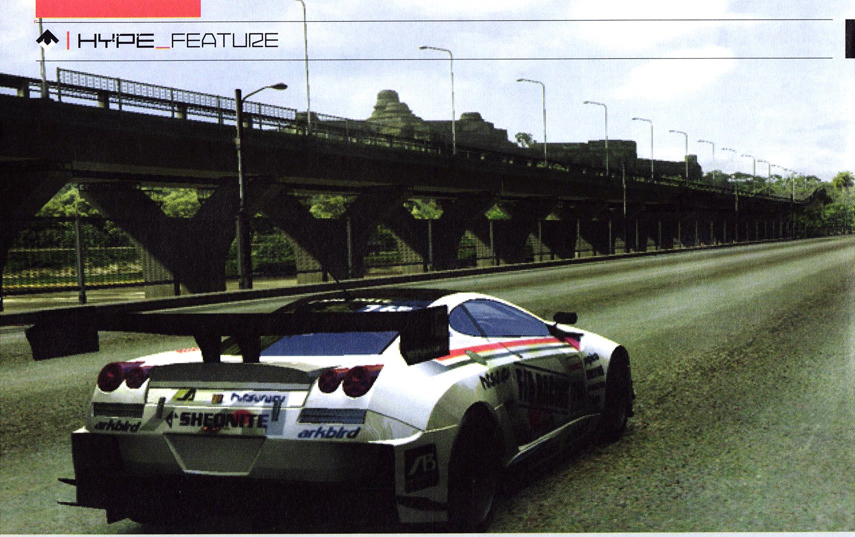
RIDGE RACER

WE CAN'T HELP IT: WHOA!

Ever since the debut of the very first PlayStation back in 1993, there's always been a *Ridge Racer* game alongside a new PlayStation system, offering gamers the same dependable drift-heavy racing at ultra-fast speeds on tracks designed to provide maximum tension and excitement. As we discovered when we went to the Tokyo's Meguro district to meet with the *Ridge Racer 7* development team for the first hands-on with *RR7* (the first real *Ridge Racer* on a proper Sony console since 2000's *Ridge Racer V*), this PlayStation 3 game is much more than



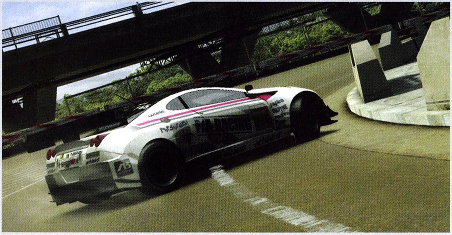


what's come before it (namely *Ridge Racer* for the PSP and *Ridge Racer 6* for the Xbox 360). Not only does it feature all-new original tracks and music, but *RR7* also introduces a slew of new online features that should put it at the head of the racing pack this winter.

Principal among the new attractions in *Ridge Racer 7* is a new focus on customization. The team realizes that customization is responsible for the popularity of other games in the genre, and that this is something *Ridge Racer* has—until now—lacked. To that end, *RR7* features over 375,000 possible parts and decal configurations, not including color combinations (which are implemented via RGB sliders), which push that number into the hundreds of millions. Despite the seemingly intimidating number of options, the part additions are very simple, and the benefits of each part are clearly explained; additionally, numerous preset paint schemes are offered for gamers disinterested in hand-tweaking the red, green, and blue. Customizable parts like spoilers, fenders, decals, hubcaps, molding, hoods, and more are among the many options, but another new element introduced in *RR7* is the "plug-in parts" feature. These are parts that significantly enhance a car's performance, like a part that analyzes your opponent's nitro or one that activates an "auto-rocket start." If you're wondering about potential balance issues with features like these, each car is limited to one plug-in, whether you're playing offline or on. Other, more subtle, enhancements to a car's tuning (although the *RR7* team is eager to point out that the game has not transformed into a racing sim) include the ability to tweak the drifting or grip specs of each car.

LET'S PLAY

Other elements include the all-new tracks designed specifically for *RR7*, like the industrial Shanghai-inspired track or the exotic-looking "Lost Ruins" track, which is covered in ivy and surrounded by cascading waterfalls and enormous Buddha statues. Completing each lap takes the customary minute and a half or so, as the tracks have been designed to keep gamer interest at optimal levels. In terms of new gameplay elements, the *RR7* team has added a "slipstream" feature, complete with slipstream gauge (to indicate how much drift you're getting by racing behind a competitor).



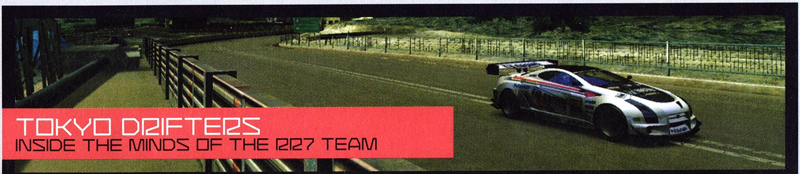
READY FOR REIKO

Designer Hideo Teramoto comments on the triumphant return of a *Ridge Racer* series icon: "I was shocked to find out just how popular Reiko Nagase was among the fans after she returned in the PSP version," he says with a laugh. "That's why we're bringing back Reiko in the PS3 *Ridge Racer*."

This should reduce some frustration experienced in past games, as passing opponents is no longer based purely on the whims of the CPU AI, but is now in the hands of the gamer with skillful, almost NASCAR-like play. Another factor in some of the new tracks is the adjustment of opponents. While most of the tracks pit you against the typical 13 other competitors (putting the full grid at 14 strong), some tracks have been specifically designed for eight racers in order to create a deeper head-to-head sense of competition.

Playing *Ridge Racer 7* felt like the *Ridge Racer* series has over the last 13 years: fast, responsive, and exciting. Of the new courses, we sampled the Shanghai course and the Lost Ruins track, and found that drifting through corners was as intuitive as it has ever been, with 14 cars caroming through chicanes and S-turns with a flick of the wrist. If anything made it difficult to keep our eyes on the road, it would've been the beautiful new scenery

PASSING OPPONENTS IS NO LONGER BASED ON THE CPU AI.



TOKYO DRIFTERS
INSIDE THE MINDS OF THE RR7 TEAM

To get to the bottom of what inspired all of *RR7*'s hot new features, we talked with a group of members from the team, including Hideo Teramoto (designer, Production Unit 4), Satoru Ouchi (programmer), Hiroshi Okubo (sound designer, soundtrack composer), Hideki Nakamura (visual designer, vehicle designer), and Masaya Kobayashi (game director) to learn about the game's genesis and what to expect from the final product.

CHECK IT OUT ON 1UP

For more in-depth information and the entire, uncut interview (with more comments on track design, driving on the moon, and how well *Gran Turismo* models Toyota MR2 Spyders), you can go to both the *OPM* site at OPM.1UP.com and the 1UP *RR7* cover story at ridgeracer.1UP.com.

OPM **What keeps the *Ridge Racer* series fresh?**

RR To answer this question, basically: new features. New online features, new customization features, and all of the new things you saw during the demo.

OPM **Since *Ridge Racer* isn't about licensed real-world cars, what do you then do to attract gamers looking for that sort of thing?**

RR With *Ridge Racer*, it's not all about realism; it's about being cool. With the speed and the design of the machines, these are things you can't experience in real life. Like things in real life aren't always cool, so we just wanted to focus on coolness rather than realism. The way we get the audience is by making something cooler than real cars in real life. You can't get this kind of speed in real life.

Having said that we're not focusing on realism, the game isn't totally unrealistic. There is some kind of realism in the game. This was an important point when making the game. We haven't gone so unrealistic that people wanting real cars would just forget about *Ridge Racer*. We're maintaining a line. It's real, but better than real. "Real unreality" is the motto.

OPM **Speaking of straddling the line between realism and cool, since drift racing is much more popular now than it was back in 1993 when the original arcade edition of *Ridge Racer* first came out, is there ever a pressure to make the drifting in the game more, well, realistic?**

RR In *Ridge Racer*, drifting is something that's very simple to pull off, that everyone can experience. Players can go around corners at high speeds; that's something we don't want to get away from. Making it more real—we might consider this in the future, if we can maintain the same sort of experience. If we attempt to make the drift mechanics more real, it'll be more difficult for players to immerse themselves in the game, and that's something we want to avoid. We want to make it more realistic in the way of sound effects and motion and things like that.

OPM **On another note, track design has always been a high point of the series. What's your criteria for designing a track and deciding when is a course "just right"?**

RR You mean, what's the process?

OPM **Yeah, because...your first pass at making a track isn't always perfect. You probably decide, "Oh, let's add a hairpin turn here and a straightaway here."**

RR Ah, you mean the layout as opposed to the visual design. The game designers and visual designers get together, and the game designer explains his particular requirements for a particular course, and the visual designer will try to come up with that on a piece of paper and they come up with the theme. After that the game designers discuss where to put certain elements, make a good balance, and keep a good rhythm.

OPM **So they start off by saying they have a visual theme in mind or does the game designer first say, "This track is meant to be a nonstop drift challenge" or "This is all about high speed chases"?**

RR It's about 50/50. It's both. It's a combination of visual and gameplay elements. It comes from both directions. So the new Asian course [one track set in an industrial city area, inspired by Shanghai, China] has a waterfall and some statues. Those ideas come from the designer first of all. Then, once it's been made, then they decide on the layout and how the race should progress. When they're actually making the course, they say, "I want to put a statue here, and I want to put a waterfall here."

> "WITH RIDGE RACER, YOU CAN START, PLAY, AND STOP."

OPM **So that affects the layout, because suddenly you think, "Well, I have to drive around this waterfall."**

RR Exactly, so that's why it's basically a 50/50 process. When they design tracks, it's comparable to how a band makes its music. Everyone comes together and says "I want to do this, and I want to do that." It's not just one person. It's a mixture of everyone's ideas; it's a collaboration.

OPM **When you're designing a course, do you set limits upon yourself? For example, if you used a remote-control car kit with a limited amount of track pieces to lay out your tracks, you could design as many courses as you want within a specific amount of track.**

RR When designing tracks, we take into account the amount of time it takes a player to finish a lap. We try to keep the time around the 1 minute, 30 seconds mark. Any longer, and the player will lose concentration and get bored of the track. Plus, there are the constraints of the console's memory and how powerful the system is. If it's too long, then it becomes hard to make.

OPM **Are you ever worried about offering too much customization or getting too complicated?**

RR With the *Ridge* series, it's all been about arcade racing, so there are many gamers who don't like the feel of gamers like *Gran Turismo*. It's bothersome to tune your car and make all these settings just to race. But with *Ridge Racer*, you can just start, play, and stop whenever you like. But with these new customization features, everything is simple and easy. It's not very complex; anyone can tweak their settings, so we're not too worried about it.

With games like *Gran Turismo*, while you're equipping different parts, you'll get some really complicated description that goes on forever. Finally, at the end, it'll tell you what it actually does. But as you saw with *Ridge Racer 7*'s customization—for example, the drift enhancer plug-in unit, with that description you'll see the actual result—you'll see what the part does straight away. It's not that we don't like realism, but the game mechanics found in *Gran Turismo* don't suit *Ridge Racer's* atmosphere. We do the fine-tuning kind of stuff in *MotoGP*.

OPM **So what, then, does "arcade racing" mean to you guys?**

RR Arcade racing is all about easy to play, easy to get into. It's all about fun, no worries. You don't have to study or train yourself to become a better player, although you can if you want. You don't have to be at a certain level to play it; you can just pick up and play. If you go to the arcade, you don't see an arcade game that you have to study and train for...unless you play fighting games, of course. Our programmer here has 20 years of experience making arcade games.... So having all that experience, that's why *Ridge Racer* is what it is today.

tearing our attention away from the race at hand. While the version we played was capped at 30 frames per second, the *Ridge* team guarantees us that the final product will run at 60 fps, and we believe them.

Naturally, with the formidable increase in power with the move up to the PS3, *Ridge Racer 7* features state-of-the-art, high-definition graphics. Besides the breathtaking environments and car models, you can now see a polygonal driver spinning the wheel behind the windshield. When the driver turns the steering wheel, so, too, do the wheels turn in sync with the driver. The soundtrack now spreads out among 5.1 channels of sound for a complete audiovisual assault, while the actual atmosphere provided by the soundtrack hearkens back to the early days of *Ridge Racer*, when the music was designed to catch your attention in arcades.

TAKING THE BATTLE ONLINE

Chief among the new features in *Ridge Racer 7* is the battery of online-specific elements designed to maximize player satisfaction in the online arena. Naturally, players will be able to upload their progress and scores to the Internet so as to show off just how accomplished they are. Various rankings are attainable in *RR7* (eight or nine rankings will be offered), beginning with Rookie and ending with the ultimate rank of Ridge Racer (only one player in the world can obtain this rank at any one time). While various functionalities may change between now and the game's release (Namco would only commit to "PS3 launch window"), one of the ideas the team plans to implement is the continual uploading of player data and scores, without requiring players to actively play online. As long as their PS3 is plugged in and online, scores and progress will automatically upload and appear on other players' screens via a stock-ticker-style update bar. "Hero interviews" will allow players who, for example, may have beaten the entire Ridge State Grand Prix challenge, to type in and upload a comment like "I totally r00L!," which will, in turn, be distributed to all players connected online.

Whenever a player hosts an online battle, a variety of stats appear for each entrant to show you what you're up against. In competition, gamers earn Online Battle Points (OBP)—which, along with a number of other criteria, like Fame, number of wins online, and total distance driven, determine your overall ranking. A player's name, nationality, and title also appear when joining a game. Another of the benefits gained from being perpetually connected is the hosting of various UFRA (Universal Federation of Ridge Racing Association) events, which are special downloadable events hosted by Namco. The full slate of modes included in *Ridge Racer 7* are: Online Battle, Global Time Attack, Arcade, UFRA Special Event, Machine Connector, and Ranking Browser.

ONLY ONE PLAYER IN THE WORLD CAN BE "RIDGE RACER."

RORSCHACH RACER

One-word answers from the *RR* team about other racing games...

OPM: *Daytona USA.*
RR: Horse.

OPM: *Scud Race.*
RR: Dark.

OPM: *Virtua Racing.*
RR: Polygons.

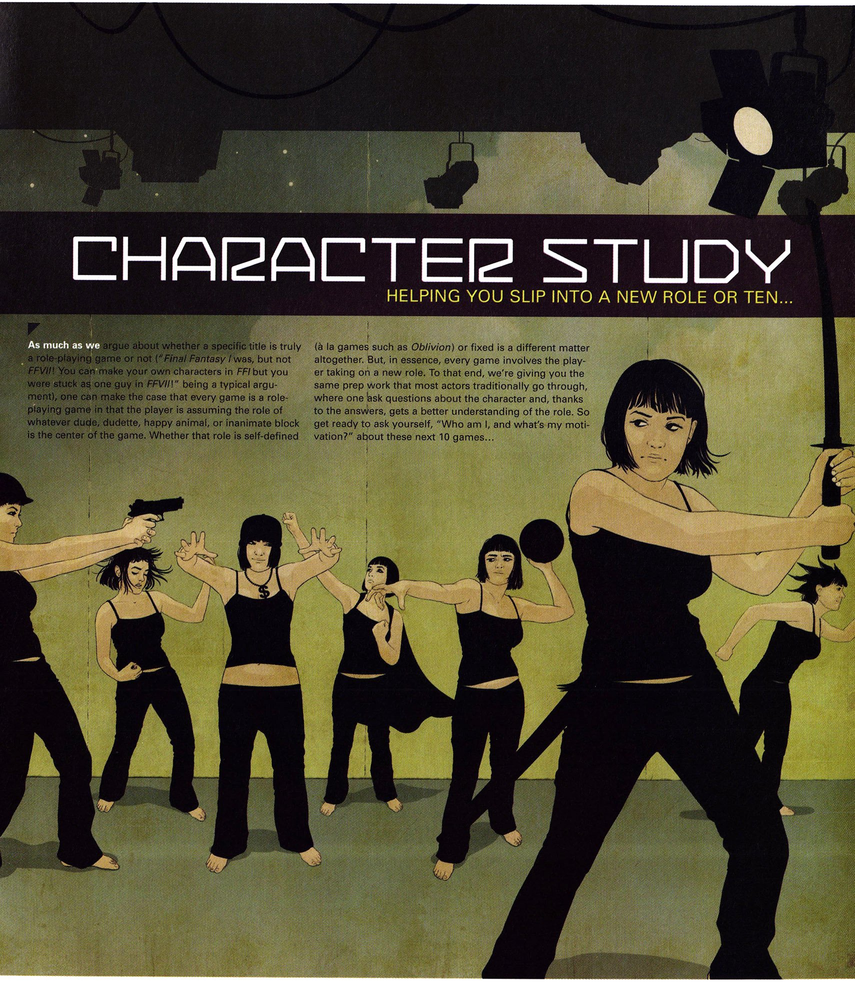
OPM: *Gran Turismo.*
RR: Difficult.

OPM: *Sega Rally.*
RR: Off-road.

OPM: *PGR3.*
RR: Ferrari.

OPM: *Burnout.*
RR: Friends.

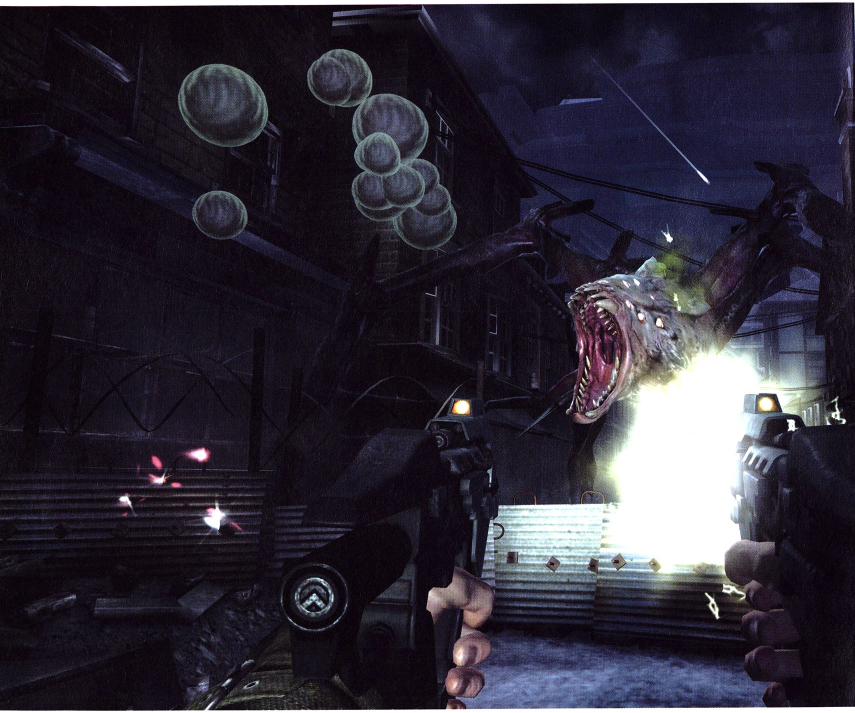
Illustration: STUNTKID



CHARACTER STUDY

HELPING YOU SLIP INTO A NEW ROLE OR TEN...

As much as we argue about whether a specific title is truly a role-playing game or not ("*Final Fantasy I* was, but not *FFVII*! You can make your own characters in *FFI* but you were stuck as one guy in *FFVII*!" being a typical argument), one can make the case that every game is a role-playing game in that the player is assuming the role of whatever dude, dudette, happy animal, or inanimate block is the center of the game. Whether that role is self-defined (à la games such as *Oblivion*) or fixed is a different matter altogether. But, in essence, every game involves the player taking on a new role. To that end, we're giving you the same prep work that most actors traditionally go through, where one ask questions about the character and, thanks to the answers, gets a better understanding of the role. So get ready to ask yourself, "Who am I, and what's my motivation?" about these next 10 games...



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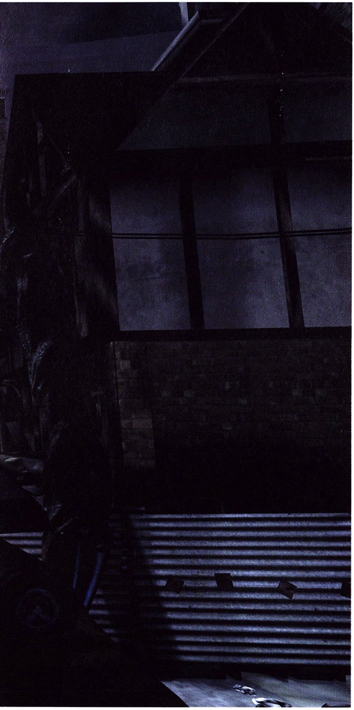
RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

VIVA LA RESISTANCE!



WHO AM I?

Sergeant Nathan Hale, a U.S. Army Ranger who is part of the initial wave of soldiers sent to help England fend off a massive invasion by the Chimera (weird "alien" baddies that are sweeping through Europe). In particular, you are playing Hale between July 11 and July 14, 1951—because, within these three days, weird stuff happens to him.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

Initially, it's to survive the Chimeran invasion and take the fight to them. Then, something wacky happens to Hale—he and his squad are ambushed and infected by a Chimeran virus, but Hale survives while everyone else just flat-out dies. Now, not only are you dealing with fighting the Chimera, but you also have to figure out what the hell happened to you—and why.

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

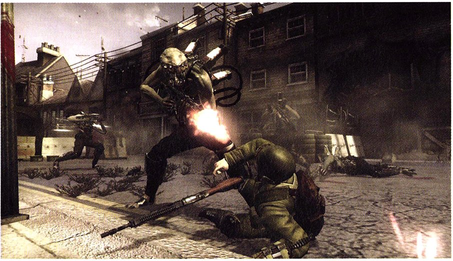
Your main "buddy" is probably Rachel Parker, a British officer who gives perspective on Hale and his disappearance (she narrates events from her detached viewpoint, which gives context to your playing as Hale and seeing for yourself what really happened at any given point). Any friendly allied soldiers that you run across are also your buddies. Allied soldiers are either just AI, or, if you're playing splitscreen co-op, your real-life buddy next to you on the couch, or anyone else on your team when playing online multiplayer.

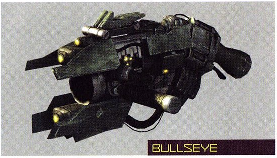
The rest of the game is filled with various types of Chimera, including typical hybrids (workhorse soldiers), menials (simple Chimera who run up and grab you), slipskulls (sneaky Chimera who crawl along the ceiling), leapers (little swarming critters), and other various baddies that we don't know the names of yet (including a really big Chimera that kind of reminds us of a rancor from *Return of the Jedi*, and a big spiderlike creature).

HALE GETS AMBUSHED AND IS INFECTED BY THE CHIMERA...

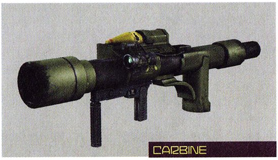
LEVEL LOVE

This alternate Earth is home to some crazy reinterpretations of places like Grimsby Cannery (which is now a bizarre Chimeran conversion facility), Manchester (a totally wrecked town, which has a cool fight inside a church) and Nottingham, which looks like a *Ratchet* level that got misplaced by accident.

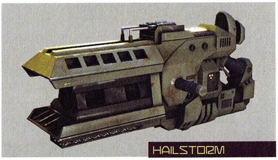




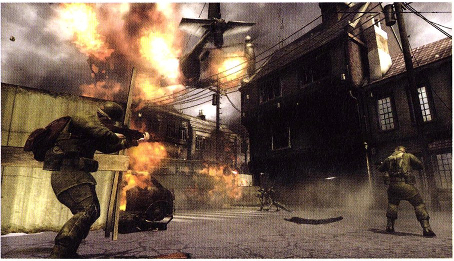
BULLSEYE



CARBINE



HAILSTORM



HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

By using a large variety of weapons to blow the ever-living crap out of the Chimera. The guns might arguably be the real stars of the game, and here's a rundown of the weapons that we particularly noticed in our playthrough:

BULLSEYE: The standard-issue Chimeran rifle (human grunts get M14s, Chimeran grunts get Bullseyes). It shoots weird Chimeran bullets just fine, but it's better to use the alt-fire to shoot a tag; all your bullets then home in on the tag.

AUGUR: A Chimeran assault rifle that fires bullets that can drill through up to three surfaces. Here's a demonstration: You're on a street and the Chimera are attacking from inside a local store—you can go to one side of the building, shoot some Augur bullets, and watch them drill their way through two other stores before piercing some Chimerans. The alt-fire generates a shield, which is great since your Augur can still shoot through the shield as well.

FAREYE: A sniper rifle that does typical sniper rifle stuff like zooming in and shooting Chimera in the head. A notable feature is that the alt-fire turns on focus mode, which is kind of like bullet time in that it slows everything down and lets you aim much better. But turning focus mode off is a bit disorienting since everything switches back to normal speed almost instantly.

HEDGEHOG: A great crowd-control weapon. It's a Chimeran grenade that bounces and then jumps up in the air to dispense powerful needles in all directions. When you're getting totally hassled by the Chimera, this is a great way to create some breathing room.

LAARK: A rocket launcher that fires rockets you can guide. But it's not like the *Metal Gear Solid* series, where you assume the rocket's point of view. No, when you hold down the R1 button, the rocket stops in midflight and emits a laser beam indicating where it's heading. This laser beam happens to end wherever your reticule is pointed—letting go of R1 will let the rocket continue on its course until you press and hold R1 again to redirect it; you can keep guiding it until it hits something. That's just the normal fire; the alt-fire shoots a rocket that spews out tiny missiles along the way.

HAILSTORM: A weapon made for tight corridors, it fires ricocheting bullets—each bounce actually increases the bullet's damage. The alt-fire is also corridor-centric: It generates a floating autoturret that fires the same bullets, which is great for watching your back as you zip down a scary tunnel.

SAPPER: A Chimeran weapon, it fires a big glop of goop that either explodes on contact or is manually detonated via alt-fire. You can layer on thick piles of the stuff and watch it drip down walls before blowing it up in a wash of acid and weird Chimeran explosives. It's very icky, and it's one of the guns that needed the PS3's computational power to do it justice.

REAPER: A newly revealed weapon that is a new twist on an old standby: dual-wielding pistols. While most games have both pistols aimed in the same direction, the Reapers are capable of independent firing. How? Consider R1 the right hand and L1 the left hand. When you hold down both buttons, the reticule splits off into two individual reticules. Your hands sweep the area, and a modest auto-lock from each pistol will then latch onto whatever enemy crosses its path. This is great for taking on lots of small Chimera. ǀ

THE REAPER PISTOLS CAN INDEPENDENTLY FIRE.

DRIVE-BY

Besides the large variety of crazy weapons (we also noticed brief glimpses of a lightning gun of sorts and a flamethrower that's "not what you expect" according to Insomniac weapons guy Nathan Fouts), there will also be a host of vehicles, including jeeps and weird spider-mechs.

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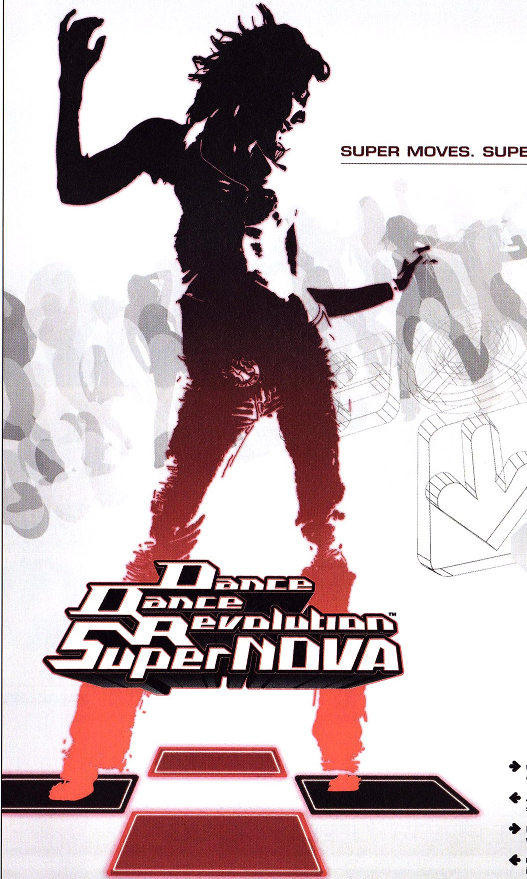

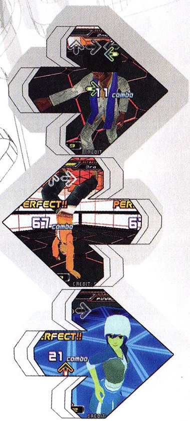

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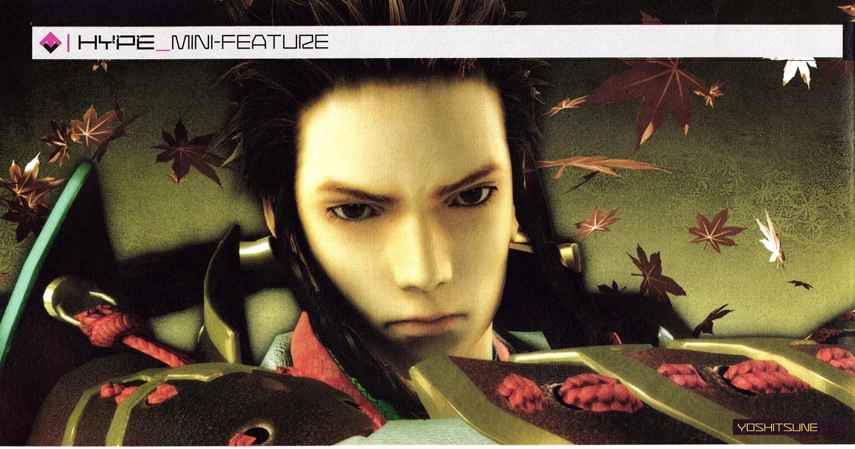

YOSHITSUNE

BENKEI

LADY SHIZUKA

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GENJI: DAYS OF THE BLADE

THERE'S A REASONABLE EXPLANATION FOR THE GIANT CRABS

WHO AM I?

You are one of four playable characters in this fast-paced follow-up to one of the better PS2 *Dynasty Warriors*–style games (*OPM* scored the first *Genji* 3.5/5)—and one of the better-looking PS3 titles we've seen. Loosely based on the great feudal battles of medieval Japan, your main role is that of the legendary samurai Genkuro Yoshitsune. The lithe Lady Shizuka and the warrior-monk Benkei are the other playable characters revealed so far.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

Genji: DOTB offers lush playable battlegrounds (hooray for next-gen water effects!) and hundreds of enemies to button-mash through as you lead your clan in an epic fight for control of feudal Japan against the Heishi. Add the promise of twice the gameplay of the original *Genji* (Sony estimates 15 hours), and, of course, "historically based" giant crabs, and you have all the motivation you'll need.

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

You're mainly battling the minions of a Heishi warlord, but what really makes the game are the "historically based" crabs. *Genji: DOTB*'s U.S. producer, Kyle Shubel, explains: "In the Heian era of [feudal] Japan, you had the Heishi and the Genji clans fighting for dominance. One particular naval battle, which is in the game, was the Battle of Dannoura. There were so many ships in the harbor that people were hopping from boat to boat without getting their feet wet. Fighting continued all day long. So many Heike warriors [Heike is the singular form of Heishi] died that day that, as the legend goes, their spirits were imbued into the crabs that are native to that harbor. Heike crabs almost look like they have a samurai face on them, with a weird mustache—and you even can see the eyes. In the game, if you get the crabs to turn around, you can actually see similar faces in the back.

"Some of these Heike crabs can get pretty freaking big. Apparently the largest ones on record were over 2 meters in diameter (over 6 feet). The crabs in the game are much larger than that, but, hey, we're talking legend here. We're embellishing history to make it spectacular—you have to have something fantastical."

> "SOME OF THESE CRABS CAN GET PRETTY FREAKING BIG."

HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

Switch on the fly between your four playable characters and mow through hordes of enemies with a choice of weapons varying from swords to tree-sized poles, using charge-ups and combos. Boss battles end every level and sublevel and most are easily beaten through efficient character-switching combos. Alas, *Genji: DOTB* is single-player only. |

BIG SHELL

According to Joel Martin, associate curator of Invertebrate Zoology at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles, the widest a Heike crab gets is a whopping 0.8 inches (not counting the legs, which would total about 2 inches across). *Genji 2* should have used Nomura's jellyfish, which actually do measure 2 meters across.

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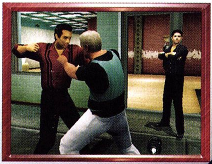

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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PlayStation 2

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GRAND THEFT AUTO: VICE CITY STORIES

GET READY TO DANCE, WITH LANCE VANCE. AS HIS BROTHER, VIC

WHO AM I?

You're All-American do-gooder Vic Vance, who represents a break from the series norm in that he's essentially a *nice guy*. Rather than representing a faction of organized crime, Vic is actually a Marine who unwittingly becomes embroiled in the nefarious underground dealings of Vice City.

Here's an interesting fact for those of you not schooled in *GTA*-lore: Vic is one of the three characters that die at the beginning of *Vice City* during the drug deal Tommy Vercetti is sent to supervise.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

It's all about setting the scene for what's to come in future *GTA*s. We hope you've been paying attention to the *GTA* timeline, because this one is chronologically the *first game* in the broader narrative. Set two years before the events of *Vice City* (which puts this one in 1984), it establishes a number of characters and plot points that set a foundation for the entire franchise.

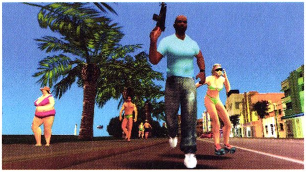
EVEN MORE AMBITIOUS IN ITS SCOPE...

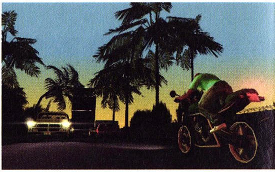
WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

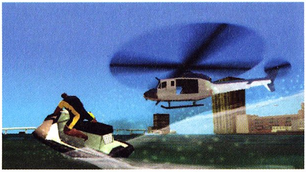
Vic is the brother of *Vice City's* reprehensible Lance Vance (the one voiced by former *Miami Vice* star Philip Michael Thomas, who sounded like he was channeling Hong Kong Phooey half the time. He returns to the role in this game, too) and finds himself immediately mixed up in Lance's empire-building schemes. Expect Liberty City crime boss Sonny Forelli to play a prominent role as well.

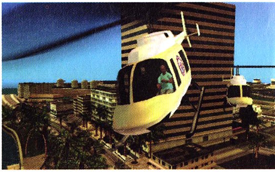
HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

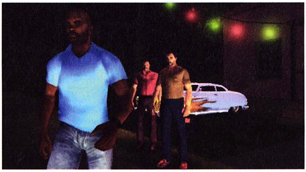
Like *Liberty City Stories*, *Vice City Stories* draws much from its nonportable progenitor, and as such has grown in scale and scope. Vic's career will evolve in a larger, more finely detailed environment that boasts improved graphics with a better framerate and significantly less pop-up and draw distance problems. Even more ambitious in its scope than *LCS*, the new game has longer, more complex missions (such as one where Vic has to destroy a series of radio towers scattered throughout the city that the DEA is using to bug his house), and a lot more character interaction. There are also *a lot* more toys to play with, including helicopters, motorcycles, and Jet Skis. |

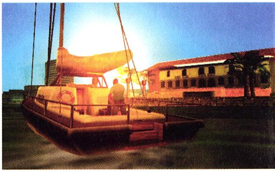


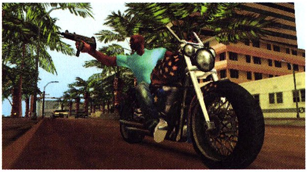


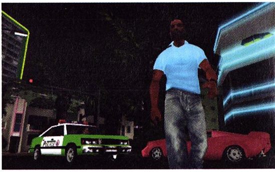


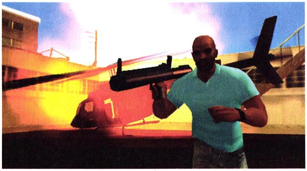


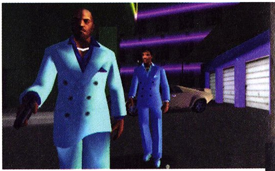












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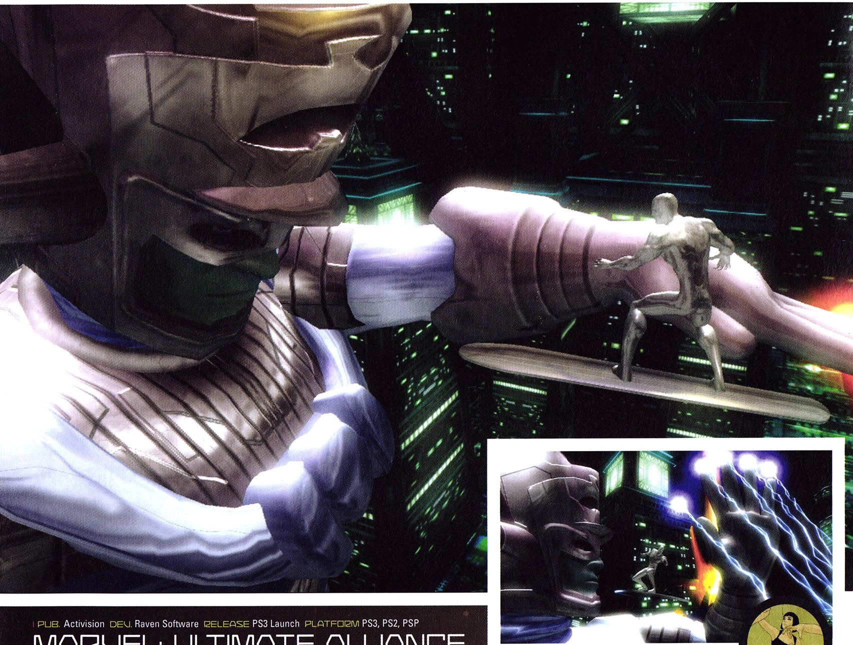


PUB. Activision **DEV.** Raven Software **RELEASE** PS3 Launch **PLATFORM** PS3, PS2, PSP

MARVEL: ULTIMATE ALLIANCE

GALACTUS IS BOSS IN "NEXT-GEN LEGENDS"

WHO AM I?

You are a team of four superheroes drawn from a total of 140 in *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*, an action RPG created in the style of *X-Men Legends*. In one particularly epic boss battle you must stop Galactus, Eater of Planets, Devourer of Worlds, from consuming the Skrull homeworld.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

Galactus is cranky because you're interrupting his meal. His giant physical form slowly advances through the cityscape, destroying everything in its path to get at your hapless quartet. Along the way, you must combat his minions (his Punishers) and some hostile Skrull and avoid being grabbed by the big man (though if caught you can loosen yourself from his clutches via a rapid pounding of the Circle button). Keep in mind that switching characters on the fly will help you through this level.

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

If your team manages to elude Galactus, you'll then take control of Galactus' onetime cosmic herald, the Silver Surfer, to battle him with both the Power Cosmic and quick reaction commands (vis-à-vis button sequences). Should the Silver Surfer survive this trial, Galactus will be defeated.

HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

Your team's and Silver Surfer's failure ensures that the great purple one's world hunger will be sated. Your success means you can move on to other levels that include 17 locales, such as S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier and Atlantis, as you must ultimately stop the nefarious goals of Victor von Doom and the Masters of Evil. Even if you do not defeat Galactus, you can always try again with a new team that includes such playables as Captain America, Thor, Luke Cage, Elektra, Nick Fury, Blade, Dr. Strange, Ghost Rider, Spider-Man, Wolverine, Thing, Human Torch, Iceman, Invisible Woman, Iron Man and Mr. Fantastic in single- and multiplayer modes. Known hero nemeses include Arcade, Fing Fang Foom, Loki, MODOK and Ultron. *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* allows four-player co-op and melee online. I

CONTROL THE SILVER SURFER AND HIS POWER COSMIC.

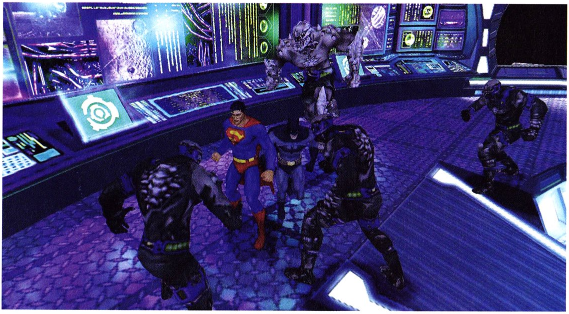
HOORAY FOR VILLAINY

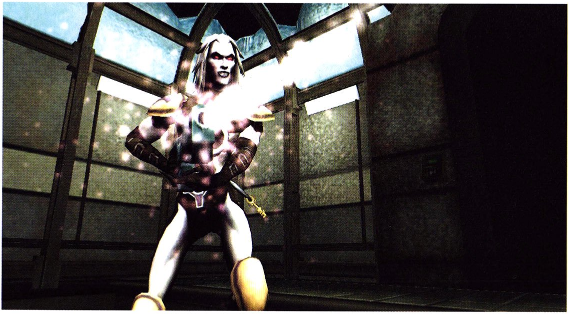
We're not sure which villain we like more, Ultron, the ultra-evil robot that destroyed a country for kicks; Fin Fang Foom, the giant dragon that wears purple shorts; or MODOK, a giant floating head whose name is short for "Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing."

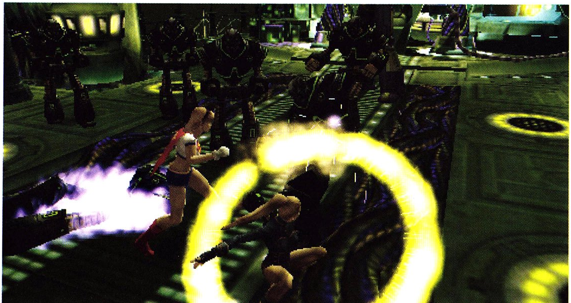
| **PUB.** Warner Bros. **DEV.** Snowblind **RELEASE** Fall **PLATFORM** PS2, PSP

JUSTICE LEAGUE HEROES

A MODERN HEROIC PANTHEON







WHO AM I?

You just happen to be seven of the most powerful people on the planet (at least in the DC universe): Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern (John Stewart), The Flash, Martian Manhunter, and Zatanna. That's the core seven who make up the Justice League—yet many other superheroes are part of the League, and these extras come in the form of unlockables. Extra team members include two other Green Lanterns (Kyle Rayner and *the* Hal Jordan) and that rascally liberal Green Arrow—and for the PSP version, Supergirl and Black Canary also join the League.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

Why, nothing short of stopping Earth from being ended! While incidents like robots going nuts in Metropolis, monsters invading secret labs, and White Martians marshalling an invasion fleet might seem unrelated, that's what you're supposed to think. As you resolve these incidents, you figure out who's masterminding this whole operation.

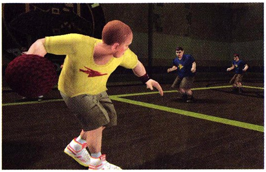
UNLOCKABLE HEROES LIKE HAL JORDAN...

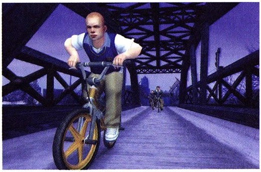
WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

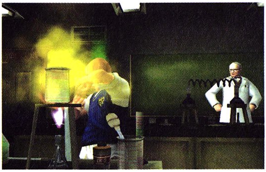
Besides the aforementioned minions (robots and monsters) and other members of the League, you'll also encounter many classic villains for both individual team members and the League as a whole. In addition to previously known foes like Gorilla Grodd, Brainiac, Queen Bee, and Killer Frost, newly announced foes include The Key (is he the bizarre chemist who messes with the League's minds like in the comics, or is he the dude with the key-shaped gun in the cartoon?) and numerous Doomsday (the monster who took down Superman) clones.

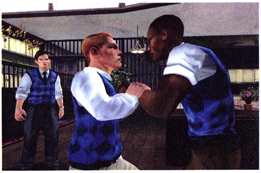
HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

By plowing through the various bad guys in an action-RPG throwdown à la Snowblind's previous titles (*Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, *Champions of Norrath I* and *II*), but with superhero twists (regenerating health, no potions, flight). You take two heroes at a time (the first few levels have set heroes; you then have more flexibility with whom you can use later on) to fight baddies, save civvies, and right wrongs. Besides using good ol' fists, each hero has five core superpowers to take on evildoers with—you'll be focusing on leveling up and customizing these base superpowers. While each League member has a pretty cool arsenal, we're partial to The Flash's powers (spins up a whirlwind and attacks multiple enemies by simply zipping from baddie to baddie like a pinball). |









PUB. Rockstar DEV. Rockstar Vancouver RELEASE Fall PLATFORM PS2

BULLY

IN EUROPE, THEY CALL THIS "CANIS CANEM EDIT"

WHO AM I?

A rascally 15-year-old named Jimmy Hopkins. At the start of *Bully*, you're starting a new year at your fifth school, Bullworth Academy. So, you're a bit of a troublemaker, but that might come from your being annoyed that your new stepfather is older than your grandfather, and is more irritating to boot. And you have a bit of a reputation, according to the first Bullworth student who actually talks to you, a wisecracker named Gary.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

Initially, it's just to survive through the school year. But as you play through, your initial "friend," Gary, sets in motion your true motivation: taking him down. According to him, only one guy can rule the school, and he wants to make sure it ain't you. As you navigate your way through *Bully*'s five chapters, Gary will be a constant thorn in your side as he attempts to be the true ruler of the school.

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

As mentioned before, Gary will be one of the first students you meet, and at first, he acts like your friend. But that friendship heads south pretty quickly, especially after Gary sets up a fight between you and Russell, who's a huge lummox of a bully. Or when Gary purposely manipulates other students at the school into hating you. While Gary will constantly hate on you, you also have to deal with the five cliques (nerds, greasers, preppies, jocks, and townies) and various teachers and nonstudents.

> "I'VE TAKEN DUMPS THAT WERE SMARTER THAN YOU."

HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

By performing missions for both students and teachers. One early mission for the cafeteria lunch lady has you running into town to pick up groceries and other sundry items (this mission actually introduces you to the town outside of the school). A two-part mission has you first obtaining the proper outfit to go into the secret preppy hideout (a boxing gym out in town), and the second segment has you and your new preppy friends egging a house. In between missions, you have to deal with classes (minigames based on the type of class) and nonmission critical students (who give little side quests). Performing missions, both those critical to the main story and side quests, will affect both the number of items that you have (such as cherry bombs, slingshots, or skateboards) and your reputation among the various cliques—said reputation will also affect the difficulty of a mission, depending on who's involved. And yes, this whole time, Gary snipes at you with insults like, "I've taken dumps that were smarter than you." Oh man, it'll be so sweet when you take him down once and for all.

BOOK LEARNIN'

The Rockstar guys feel that, since there have been numerous books (*Harry Potter*) and movies (*The Breakfast Club*) about school, there should now be a game tacking the same subject. And they think it's weird when people jump on *Bully* when worse things happen in movies and books.

So if you let other people, piece by piece, make you into what they want, even if it's stupid, what happens to you?

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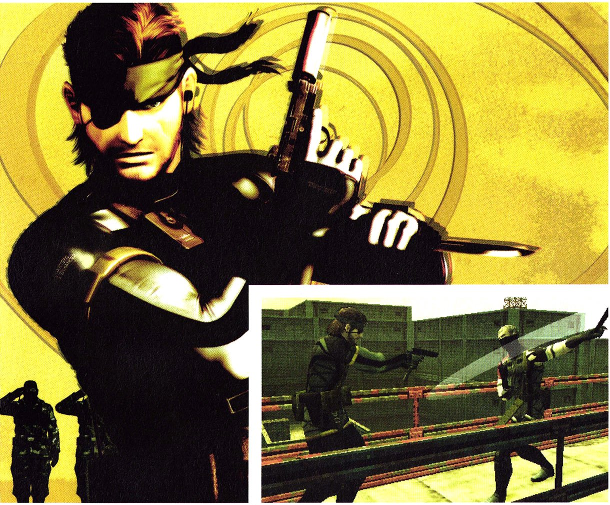


PUB. Konami DEV. Kojima Productions RELEASE Winter PLATFORM PSP

METAL GEAR SOLID: PORTABLE OPS

MORE SNAKE TALES

WHO AM I?

Naked Snake, aka the hero of *Metal Gear Solid 3*, aka Big Boss, the leader of the elite military unit FOX.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

You've been running a tight ship for six years, but the other members of FOX just decided to turn corrupt and steal a bunch of nuclear warheads. To hunt down your former crew, you form a new team of specialists called FOXHOUND (sound familiar?).

EXPECT TO GO THROUGH EVEN MORE EMOTIONAL ANGST.

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

Alone, you'll no doubt be dealing with some of the series' famous personalities, a young Colonel Roy Campbell among them. Expect Naked Snake/Big Boss to go through even more emotional angst as he completes the transition to übervillain. Along the way, you can recruit soldiers to fight alongside you during single- and multiplayer missions. In multiplayer you can access the entire world (in that you can connect to any Wi-Fi hot spot to not only play against other players but to download new characters for your team as well). *Portable Ops* features a wealth of online battle modes, which will boast a variety of different characters, including the slightly less-young version of *MGS3*-era Ocelot and a familiar-looking ninja....

HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

Kojima Productions is keeping mum on the specifics of the single-player mission (besides emphatically stating that this is a true action-based *MGS* title). As for multiplayer, it's still important to not be seen, but keeping silent is now of the utmost priority; every player has a sonar device that indicates where and how loud other players are. Stand still and you won't be followed—of course, that'll hardly help you win battles.

SECRET SINGLE PLAYER

As mentioned earlier, Kojima Productions is keeping a tight lid on the single-player at press time (perhaps next issue we'll get some details). Multiplayer is much like *MGS3: Subsistence*, so that dirty trick of using tranq darts and then shooting stunned foes still works.

PUB. Sega DEV. Sonic Team RELEASE PS3 Launch PLATFORM PS3

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

SONIC AND HIS AMAZING FRIENDS!

WHO AM I?

Why, you're the fastest blue critter on two feet! As expected, you'll focus on being Sonic, who's been running and jumping and blast processing for the past 15 years.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

That bad boy Dr. Eggman (or Robotnik to us Americans) is trying to kidnap Princess Elise so that he can rule the city of Soleanna or some such nonsense. Typical motive from a mad scientist who kind of looks Teddy Roosevelt in a *Sgt. Pepper's* costume. As expected, Sonic wants to run in and stop the Big Egg from hatching his scheme.

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

While Sonic maintains his antagonistic relationship with Dr. Eggman, he now has two other hedgehogs to befriend: Shadow and Silver. Shadow was that rambunctious black-furred hedgehog who ran and jumped and used guns in his own title, *Shadow the Hedgehog*. Silver is a whole new hedgehog who's supposedly from the far future—a future where hedgehogs have powers of telekinesis.

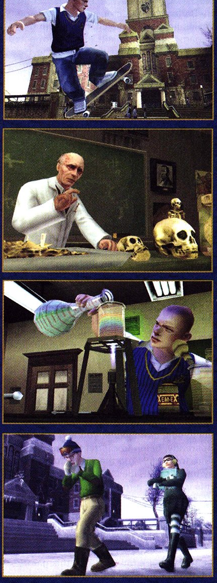
HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

This totally depends on which hedgehog you play as. If you take Sonic for a spin, then you do the typical Sonic moves of running really fast and either rolling into or jumping onto baddies to take them out. If you play as Silver, you'll have more puzzle-based action, as Silver can manipulate objects and puzzles with his mind. Shadow, for some bizarre reason, is the hedgehog that drives instead of runs, so when you need a big, honking truck to zip around a certain area, you should use him instead.

ROCKSTAR GAMES PRESENTS

BULLY™

ORTH ACADEMY
CANIS CANEM EDIT



COMING OCTOBER 17, 2006

WWW.ROCKSTARGAMES.COM/BULLY

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PlayStation®2

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PUB. Sony CEA DEV. Sony Santa Monica RELEASE February 2007 PLATFORM PS2

GOD OF WAR II

RAGE AGAINST THE SUPREME

WHO AM I?

You are Kratos, the Spartan soldier who ascended to immortality by defeating Ares and taking his place as the god of war.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

Cory Barlog, the director for *God of War II*, explains how you have changed from the first game: "Kratos is still kind of tormented [by] some of the things that he's done. He's coming to terms with the idea that he's a puppet and that he has masters beyond what he originally thought. He's realizing that there's a lot more to the world than he has ever imagined."

You're also struggling with what it means to be a god, and that causes some ties that you have had in the past to become even stronger. "Every god had his own home city—his homies. And when Kratos became the new god of war, he found he had an even stronger allegiance with Sparta—it's sort of his last connection to humanity," says Barlog. "The conquest and destruction of other cities is his outlet for his anger. But that quickly becomes a bad thing for him."

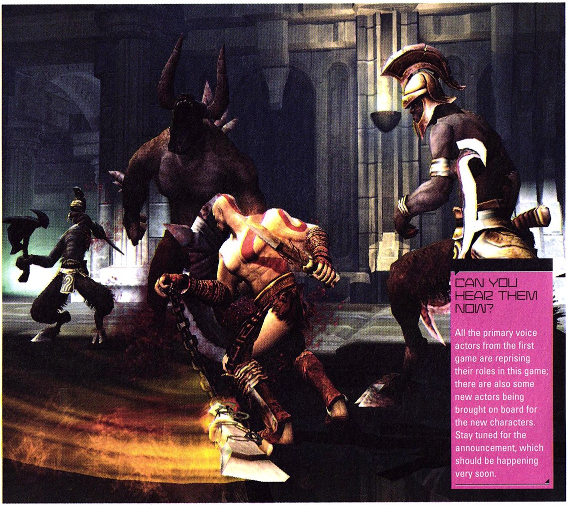
YOUR FIRST FIGHT AGAINST A COLOSSUS!

WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

It doesn't take long for some of your enemies to conspire against you and kill you (apparently, being immortal doesn't mean you're infallible). You then have to fight your way back from Hades. One of your very first fights is against a monstrous colossus—and if you remember the hydra from the opening portion of the first game, you'll get an idea of the magnitude that the colossus will have. "We wanted that James Bond or Indiana Jones sort of experience where, within three minutes, you are full-bore into this game," explains Barlog. "We wanted to open the game with a larger moment than we had in any of [in] the last game."

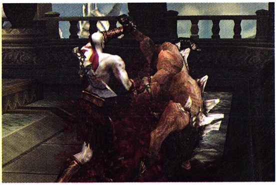
HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

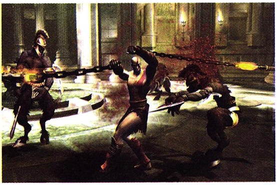
As before, you'll gain weapons (such as the wind bow seen at E3) by defeating enemies. "He has all-new powers," promises Barlog. "It isn't just going to be, 'Hey, we're just making something with a few new effects on it.' We're also making him mobile during combat." Also new to the game are relics, which you'll collect along the way. Relics grant temporary special abilities; for example, the amulet of the fates allows you to slow down the fates of people around you while keeping your own fate moving in real time—it basically lets you move through time extra quickly. |

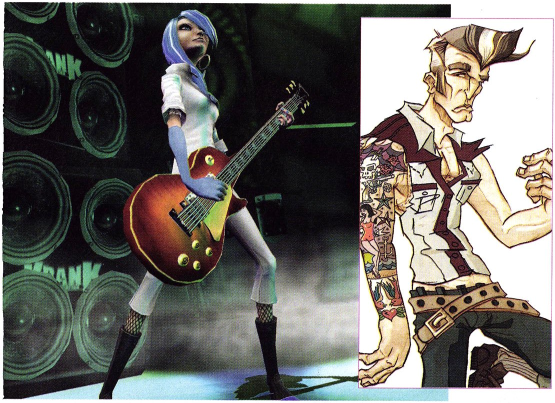


CAN YOU HEAR THEM NOW?

All the primary voice actors from the first game are reprising their roles in this game; there are also some new actors being brought on board for the new characters. Stay tuned for the announcement, which should be happening very soon.







| PUB. Red Octane DEV. Harmonix RELEASE November PLATFORM PS2

GUITAR HERO II

NOW YOUR LIFE'S NO LONGER EMPTY

WHO AM I?

For now, let's call you "Rockabilly." You happen to be one of the new character types in *Guitar Hero II*. Other new guitarists are a Norwegian black metaller named Lars Umlaut and an unnamed rocker chick. Of course, if you like playing as good ol' Axel Steel or Pandora or any other original *GH* character, they'll be in *GH2* as well, but with some new threads.

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

To rock your way through a new battle of the bands and then proclaim yourself a true guitar hero once you reach the top. That, and to unlock more songs and generally fulfill your guitar-playing fantasies.

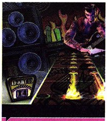
WHO AM I DEALING WITH AND WHAT'S MY RELATIONSHIP?

You'll be dealing with the fickle crowd who controls your fate based on how much they like your guitar playing. One way to help wow them is to use the new Practice Mode to learn your licks before going up in front of a crowd.

HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?

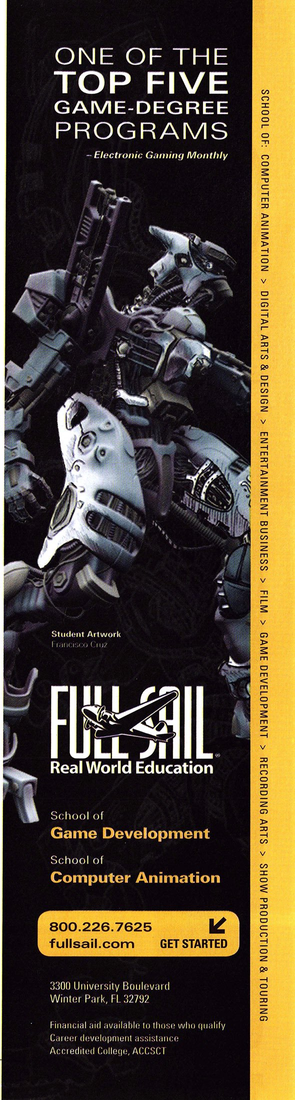
See that crazy long song list to the right? You get what you want by totally rocking out to those songs at all-new venues. That track list has 24 songs out of the total 55, and to get us to the (very nearly) halfway point, we're going to reveal another song right here: "Carry On Wayward Son" by Kansas. For those of who might not have been around during the '70s when Kansas rocked out with that title, you might recall that it plays during the end credits of that Will Ferrell tour de force *Anchorman*. |

"Beast and the Harlot" - Avenged Sevenfold
"Can't You Hear Me Knocking" - The Rolling Stones
"Crazy on You" - Heart
"Freebird" - Lynyrd Skynyrd
"Heart-Shaped Box" - Nirvana
"Jessica" - The Allman Brothers Band
"John the Fisherman" - Primus (original track)
"Laid To Rest" - Lamb of God
"Madhouse" - Anthrax
"Message in a Bottle" - The Police
"Misirlou" - Dick Dale
"Psychobilly Freakout" - Reverend Horton Heat
"Shout at the Devil" - Mötley Crüe
"Strutter" - KISS
"Surrender" - Cheap Trick
"Sweet Child O' Mine" - Guns N' Roses
"Tattooed Love Boys" - The Pretenders
"Them Bones" - Alice in Chains
"Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight" - Spinal Tap
"Trippin' on a Hole in a Paper Heart" - Stone Temple Pilots
"War Pigs" - Black Sabbath
"Who Was in My Room Last Night?" - Butthole Surfers
"You Really Got Me" - The Kinks, as performed by Van Halen
"YYZ" - Rush



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

A superduper helpful new feature is the practice mode. Now your cries of "I don't know this song too well!" are moot, as you can just go into the song and do things like focus on specific sections of a song, and even mess with the tempo of said section.



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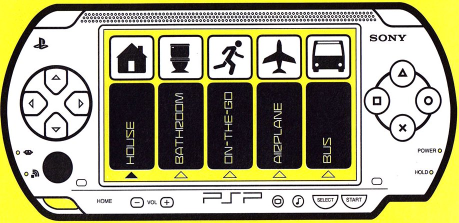


WHERE DO YOU WANT TO PLAY TODAY?

GAMES AND PLACES TO TAKE YOUR PSP

While the PSP library is finally seeing plenty of good games, not all of them realize that the PSP is, well, portable. To that end, we're highlighting six upcoming titles and giving our own recommendations as to the most appropriate places to play them (just check out our handy icons)....

PUB. Sony CEA DEV. Guerrilla Games
RELEASE October 31

KILLZONE: LIBERATION

MORE FUN THAN A PAINTBALL TO THE GROIN

Where should I be playing this? During those paintball-match lulls

Why? When you and your nerdy friends are out in the woods of Wisconsin playing would-be survivalist, there's a lot of downtime—and *Killzone: Liberation* is the perfect PSP shooter to keep your trigger finger sharp. The miniaturized version of Guerrilla's PS2 shooter is that PSP rarity: a game designed from the ground up for Sony's portable system. Objectives are set up in bite-sized, checkpoint-based chunks, perfect for those lulls in action when you're waiting for your opponents to traipse through the forest and finally find you. If you'd like to keep your whole team alert and at the ready during said lulls, there are ad hoc multiplayer and co-op modes, too. And hey, you'll be spending the whole paintball match trying to avoid getting hit in the junk, plus you'll have to strip naked and search your body for ticks once you get home—so you might as well have *some* fun, right? ●

PUB. EA Games DEV. EA Canada/EALA
RELEASE Fall

MEDAL OF HONOR HEROES

REPLACING THE PS3 ENTRY AS THIS YEAR'S *MEDAL OF HONOR*

Where should I be playing this? At home, next to your PC.

Why? While many PSP titles have trouble getting even two- or four-player online matches working, *Medal of Honor Heroes* makes the bold claim that it will support 32-player online matches. EA describes multiplayer as the "core" of the game, and will have six modes ready for players who tire of deathmatch (think capture the flag, control points, and so on). It's got a solution for those who think the PSP can't do first-person shooter controls, too—the face buttons control the camera while the analog nub moves you around. It's a bit awkward to double-tap and hold a face button to increase your turning speed, but we've seen worse interfaces. And that whole play-next-to-your-PC thing? Players will be able to download software from the game's official website and set up their own servers if they choose, giving hardcore fans the option to customize their games and clans with personal settings. ●

PUB. Konami DEV. Konami
RELEASE Winter

SILENT HILL ORIGINS

GO BACK TO THE BEGINNINGS OF EVIL

Where should I be playing this? In a ghost town, preferably. Try the mostly deserted Centralia, PA (population: 11)—the real-life slice of suburban tragedy on which *Silent Hill* is based—or find one closer to you at ghosttowns.com.

Why? Because the *Silent Hill* series is all about setting the right atmosphere, and *Origins* details the events that lead up to the classic survival-horror adventure. As stranded truck driver Travis O'Grady, you'll play a role in turning Silent Hill into the unholy place of falling ash and creepy s*** that it is today. Maybe you'll find even more insight into Alessa's screwy past. Explore the desolate town's streets, schools, and insane asylums in a *Resident Evil 4* over-the-shoulder camera perspective. That should help you keep track of all those whatever-the-hell-those-things-are on the PSP's small screen. Not to mention the fact that sledgehammer blows to creatures' heads just feel so much better when they're up close and personal. ●

LEGEND

HOUSE
For when you're at home, or any one place for a lengthy period of time.

BATHROOM
For when you're in one place, but only for a short period of time.

ON-THE-GO
For when you're out and about.

AIRPLANE
For when you're stuck on a long trip.

BUS
For when you're on a trip that could end at any moment.

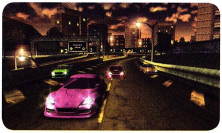
SANDMAN
LONESTAR
20/270

| PUB. Sony CEA DEV. Zipper
RELEASE Fall

SOCOM: US NAVY SEALs FIRETEAM BRAVO
THIS IS PSP TO PS2, I HEAR YOU 5x5

Where should I be playing this? Both when you're on the plane being shipped out to a tour of duty and when you come back home.

Why? Few things kill time faster than quick bursts of tactical action. *Fireteam Bravo 2* ups the tactical ante by slowing the action somewhat (by making aiming and lock-on a bit slower) and adding things like command equity (determines additional items and abilities like calling in airstrikes) and local influence (based on collateral damage, and determines how much help you get from natives). But the feature that encourages you to play this both away and at home is crosstalk, where actions performed in the PSP version can affect missions in the PS2 title (*SOCOM: US Navy SEALs Combined Assault*)—take out enemy targets fast enough in the PSP version, and the crosstalk comes into play when you synchronize your save with the PS2 title. Then, when you perform a mission in the same area, it will be secured. Bravo! ●

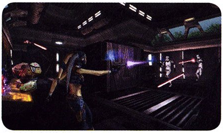


| PUB. EA Games DEV. EA Canada
RELEASE Fall

NEED FOR SPEED CARBON OWN THE STREETS
A $300 OPTION AT THE DEALERSHIP

Where should I be playing this? When you're stuck on the bus and wish you and your buddies were driving tuned-up 2006 Honda Civics with that really short hood instead.

Why? First off, it's a *Need for Speed*, so you have quick racing with tuning elements to get you through your commute. That's all fine and dandy, but additionally, you now have both a new crew mechanic and an open city environment in which to race with said crew. During your commute downtime, you can recruit crew members to race alongside you—crew members improve as the game progresses, so every bus/subway ride translates into better racers. The new open city makes it easier for portable play, as you can just set short goals like find a quick race or learn a new shortcut, all without having to leave the game. And when you find yourself about to land or stop or leave, you can keep on tuning and customizing your car, as well as creating your own graffiti tag to spray around town. ●



| PUB. Ubisoft DEV. Ubisoft Montreal
RELEASE December

STAR WARS LETHAL ALLIANCE
A TWI'LEK AND A DROID AT A BAR...

Where should I be playing this? In a galaxy far, far away, or, at the very least, on the couch of your *Star Wars* nerd friend who decides to host some sort of *Star Wars* megamarathon, where you can time yourself to play this in between *Episodes III* and *IV*.

Why? Because this is a wholly new action game that takes place in that time period. You play as two characters: Twi'lek Rianna Saren and her droid Zeeo, who work together to fight bad Empire dudes and find the plans to the first Death Star. The "collaborative fighting," where Rianna focuses on weapons and acrobatics while Zeeo focuses on defense and hacking, sounds pretty intriguing on paper. The combination of cooperative gameplay via ad hoc and the generally epic scope of the game (locations like Tatooine, Coruscant, and the Death Star, and a whole lot of cameos from Boba Fett, Darth Vader, and even freakin' Kyle Katarn) make it more suited for playing at a *Star Wars* gathering. ●

WHERE HAVE YOU PLAYED TODAY?

This is just a quick and dirty list of places to go when playing these particular PSP games. How about you, though? Where have *you* played your PSP games? Tried playing *GTA: Liberty City Stories* while in a cab? Played *Lumines* at a rave? LARPed with *The Lord of the Rings: Tactics*? Write to us at opm@ziffdavis.com and tell us your portable gaming location stories.

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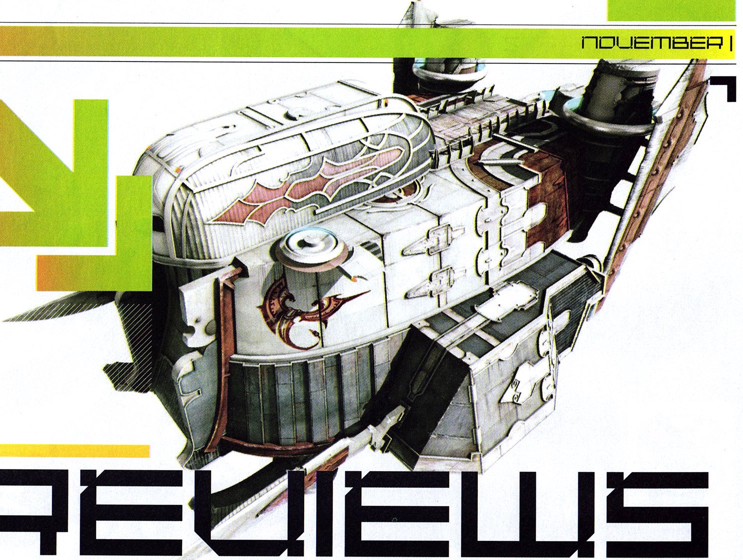

REVIEWS

MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, ONE GAME AT A TIME

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FINAL FANTASY XII

THE GREATEST PLAYSTATION FF EVER

PS2

OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE GAME OF THE MONTH

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CAPCOM CLASSICS COLLECTION RELOADED

NOSTALGIA IN HAND

PSP

OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE GAME OF THE MONTH

RATING KEY

In our new scoring system, a game that receives an *OPM* score of 10 is something truly special that deserves a spot in your collection. On the other hand, a 5 is merely average. And a 0.5? Well...at least they're fun to rip apart.

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PS2

OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE
GAME OF THE MONTH

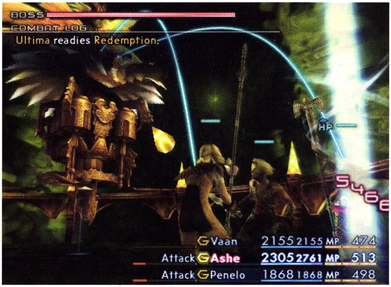
PUB. Square Enix DEV. Square Enix ESRB T MSRP $49.99

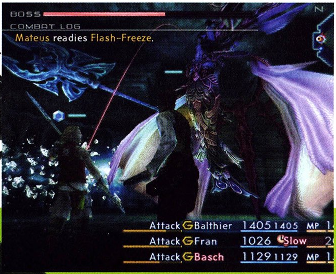
FINAL FANTASY XII

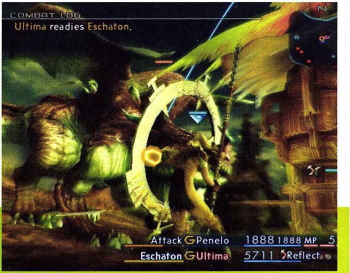
A FANTASTIC PS2 SEND-OFF

ESPERIFFIC!

The espers which you must defeat before obtaining them in the normal story line are hard enough to fight. But the optional espers have even crazier battles, like one that doesn't let you cast magick, or one that doesn't let you use the "attack" command!


BOSS
COMBAT LOG
Ultima readies Redemption.
5466
Vaan 2155 2155 MP 474
Attack Ashe 2305 2761 MP 513
Attack Penelo 1868 1868 MP 498


BOSS
COMBAT LOG
Mateus readies Flash-Freeze.
Attack Balthier 1405 1405 MP
Attack Fran 1026 Slow
Attack Basch 1129 1129 MP



BEAST WARS

If there was one thing I did more than run around fighting things, it was read the bestiary. I'm not sure whether to congratulate the localization people or the original writers, but the bestiary has some of the goofiest (in a good way) text seen in an RPG yet. A particular favorite is the first sentence for the cockatrice entry, which reads: "Lo, the mighty cockatrice, proud-feathered sphere, known as much for its ill humor as its dire rotundity." Not only does every enemy get a description, but they also get weird embellishing texts, like diary entries supposedly written by zoologists or descriptions of loot that the creature often drops.

Any fears I had about *Final Fantasy XII* not feeling like a *Final Fantasy* title were quickly dispelled when, upon booting the game, the triumphant "Bridge-Crossing Theme" blared out from my speakers. No matter how radically different the look and feel of the overall game is, there are enough allusions and references to remind us that *FFXII* deserves its name.

FF fans are traditionally the sort who just blurt out, "OK, but how's the story?" before learning much else about any particular installment. So you probably have heard that the story is about a powerful empire (Archadia) steamrolling another country (Dalmasca) and the resistance movement that rises against said empire. Within this resistance is your motley crew, which consists of a street thief (Vaan), his spunky friend (Penelo), a princess (Ashe), a sky pirate (Balthier), a Viera (Fran), and a traitorous soldier (Basch). Do these characters and their stories measure up? Yes, but in a different way than you'd expect. Many *FF* titles tend to intertwine the personal with the epic—*FFVII* was about Cloud dealing with identity issues against the backdrop of a giant meteor hitting the planet; *FFX* was about Yuna and Tidus growing close while Sin/Yu Yevon messed with reality. *FFXII*, however, focuses on the monstrously epic (a grand war filled with political intrigue topped off with an injection of godly mysticism) while somewhat de-emphasizing the characters. Sure, characters like Ashe and Balthier have great character-development moments, but overall, *FFXII* focuses more on the plots, counterplots, strategic alliances, and resistances of the war rather than the feelings of a simple thief boy. Fans who yearn for *FFVI*-style character-background-unearthing might be put off by *FFXII's* more aloof storytelling, but its grandeur and execution make up for whatever slight hiccups it has with some of the characters.

One way to describe the execution (i.e., the combination of the localized script and the numerous cut-scenes) is "*Star Wars* plus *The Lord of the Rings* as scripted by Billy Shakes." The cut-scenes echo the *Star Wars* films: Scenes of airship battles between the Archadian Empire and the Resistance look like they're taken straight out of *Return of the Jedi*, and a scene where Judge Gabranth briefs a bounty hunter resembles Vader talking to Boba Fett in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Even the character archetypes are similar, with Balthier and Fran filling the Han and Chewie roles, while Ashe is Leia and Vaan is Luke. It has that *LOTR* vibe of featuring an intrepid party exploring the countryside in search of a powerful artifact that can turn the tide in a war. And I say "scripted by Billy Shakes" because of both the preponderance of British (with some Indian and even Middle Eastern) accents in the cast and the lyrical flow of the dialogue. Peppered with words both archaic and anachronistic (phrases like "expeditionary force" or "insurgents" are paired with words like "marquess" or "'tis"), *FFXII's* dialogue sounds different than that of previous titles. Heck, Balthier frequently describes himself as a mere actor on stage. Additionally, more than in previous titles, the "villains" are fleshed out so that you can conceivably understand their point of view, unlike the more simplistic antagonists like Zemus, Kefka, and Sephiroth.

> FFXII'S GRANDEUR AND EXECUTION MAKE UP FOR SLIGHT HICCUPS.

Going up against these villains is where *FFXII* makes its other massive departure from the series: the new combat system. You see

SCOOTER SAYS

Before you think, "Wait, *OPM* loves every *FF* game, as they've given every *FF* game a five out of five!" realize that this is technically my first *FF* review. To give you some perspective, here are my own personal ratings for some of the other *FF* titles.

FFIV: My overall favorite *FF* title is definitely *FFIV* (which also helps increase *FFXII*'s overall appeal because it has so many random references to *FFIV*). Score: 10/10

FFVI: Very good for its time, but once I wipe the nostalgia away I find that it's simply a solid JRPG with an overly melodramatic story. Score: 8/10

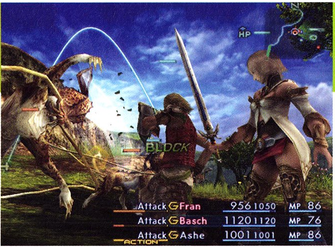
FFVIII: Er, there are a lot of interesting ideas that make this one even more "nontraditional" than *FFXII* (draw system, junctions, no real money/weapons), but they just didn't click for me, and this one is saved only by its crazy story. Score: 7.5/10

FFIX: After the weirdness of *FFVIII*, this game was a purposeful nostalgia-drive. The back-to-basics emphasis with "cute" designs make this a charming end to PS1 *Final Fantasy* games. Score: 8/10

FFX: The first PS2 *FF*, and one of the grander ones. Looks fantastic, has a pretty crazy story, and has new gameplay mechanics like aeons, swappable characters, and the sphere grid. Plus, voices! One of the more landmark *FF*s. Score: 8.5/10

FFX-2: A bizarre fan-service sequel with *Charlie's Angels* flair. Plus, the only *FF* to make changing clothes the core gameplay mechanic. Fun, lighthearted, and totally unnecessary. Score: 8/10.

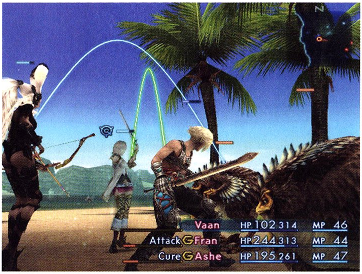
FFXI: I respect this game, but when I heard that you lose experience points when you die, that totally drained any appeal it had. Overall, it seems a bit too grindy for my taste. Score: 7/10

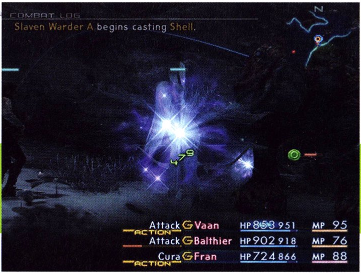

HP
BLOCK
Attack Fran 956 1050 MP 86
Attack Basch 1120 1120 MP 76
Attack Ashe 1001 1001 MP 86
ACTION

monsters on the field and you just run up to them and start fighting (a little like *FFXI*, of all titles). Sure, it feels like a slow, pseudo-real-time affair (input commands, wait, repeat as necessary) at first, but as you develop the characters and gain more options (via gambits, spells, "technicks," "mist quickenings," and gear) available to you, the tactics open up as well. The gambit system (a set of rules that player characters follow when controlled by the AI instead of you) is a great counterpart to the pseudo-real-time nature of the game—it's nice to be able to automate repetitive tasks like "when someone has 40 percent of their health, cast Curaga on him" rather than try to manually keep track of health and spellcasting in the midst of combat. Of course, you can still override the automated gambit settings. When fighting easy enemies, it's neat to watch your party automatically steal loot, target the strongest enemy, exploit vulnerabilities, and cast beneficial spells without your having to lift a finger. Yet when going up against hard enemies, you will often need to step in and compensate for the rapidly changing conditions of battle.

Another tactical layer to combat comes from the type of equipment you use. Weapons and armor are no longer just a series of increasing numbers—they now have tactical properties. Some weapons depend on the wielder's magic attribute to determine damage while others depend on the target's resistance to magic. Heavy armor provides high defense (though, there is a particular battle where heavy armor is a detriment), but light armor facilitates evasion and even results in occasional health bonuses. Equipping gear is no longer a matter of just having everyone use the biggest damage-dealers; now it pays off to diversify your party's arsenal.

Using your gear and even some of the tactics requires extensive time with the license board, an intimidating map of every skill in the game. Each character starts off with some basic licenses unlocked, and you then spend license points (LP) unlocking more squares on the board. Unlocking a square earns you both the ability to use whatever skills/weapons/spells are inside that square, but also allows adjacent squares to be unlocked as well. So while it may take a mere five LP to learn how to use a dagger, it can take something like 120 LP to learn how to cast Scathe or 75 LP to add an additional 200 hit points to your life bar. Because the license board dictates what skills, weapons, and




COMBAT LOG
Slaven Warder A begins casting Shell.
Attack Vaan HP 853 951 MP 95
ACTION
Attack Balthier HP 902 918 MP 76
Cura Fran HP 724 866 MP 88
ACTION

even bonuses your characters get, it ends up being more important than your characters' levels (leveling only really increases your hit points and magick points a bit). Instead of looking forward to hitting level 30, you'll find yourself checking your LP totals to see if you've saved enough to learn another branch of Green magic. The minor (to me) downside to the license board is that there's an odd bit of overlap (for example, to get from guns 3 to guns 5, I needed to learn stuff like maces, staves, and hand bombs), which translates into specialist characters with an odd mishmash of additional skills on top of their specialties. There also ends up being a sense of "LP grinding." As mentioned earlier, LP is easily the most important statistic in the game, but most enemies give a whopping one LP, and a generous reward from killing a boss is 20 LP (with some as low as five!). So just unlocking licenses without really focusing can lead to instances where you're like, "Oh man, I gotta fight more snow wolves before I can purchase a license I actually want." Fortunately, I love the combat so much that I don't really mind running around just to gather more LP.

Longtime fans who are concerned that *FFXII* is simply too weird need not fear, as it has the requisite awesome story, great production values, chocobo appearances, sly in-jokes for true fans, and terrific combat that is expected of a *FF* title. People who thought that *FF* totally jumped the shark with *VII* and beyond or thought that the formula was feeling a bit stale can also appreciate how unique and crazy *FFXII* is. Either way, *Final Fantasy XII* is a fitting send-off for the series on the PS2, and it justifiably has a chance to proclaim itself the best *Final Fantasy* on the PlayStation. | Thierry Nguyen

PARTY TIME

Alas, while you have six characters, only three can be used at any time, and the other three do not get experience points, so you either have to do a lot of juggling to make sure everyone's caught up or focus on making three awesome characters. Here's what I did:

ASHE: I made her the party leader, because if there's anyone else besides Vaan who fits the role as "main character," it's her. Heck, she's in the very first scene of the game, while Vaan doesn't even show up until 20 minutes later or so. I initially used her strictly as a mage, as she has a pretty high magick skill, but then I developed her into a sort of battle-mage, where I stopped having her use staves and switched her to using one-handed swords paired with shields (she still wore mystic armor for the various magic resistances/bonuses). It's pretty cool to let her alternate between hacking and slashing and unloading crazy magic like Countdown or Flare.

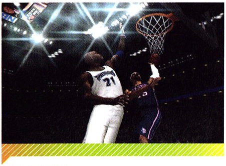
BALTHIER: I made him my thief/gunner. His high speed and agility mean that he gets hits in fast and can quickly run in for some choice pickpocketing. I augment his speed by having him equip light armor, and I also obtain licenses for various accessories that help make him a better thief. You absolutely need at least one gunner, because not only are guns ranged weapons (for flying enemies), but they also completely ignore enemy armor, which is helpful for armored-up dudes you fight later.

BASCH: When I first got him in my party, I'd knew how I would use him after I saw him punch his way through most enemies, and how he'd often be the last one standing in a tough fight. I had him equip heavy armor (so that he could be the requisite tank), and striking weapons like axes and hammers, which deal unpredictable damage (he would hit an enemy with 12 damage and then his next hit would deal 2,709 damage). I also tended to give him licenses that increase his physical damage output and his hit points in order to make him a pure fighting machine.

As for my "reserve team," I made Vaan my thief/last-ditch-White-healer (by giving him daggers and White magic), Penelo my general backup mage (she would unlock the same licenses as Ashe for magic), and Fran my thief/archer/support mage (use her speed and split her licenses between ranged weapons and Green or White magic for healing and debuffs).

JUDGMENT DAY Yeah, I said it: To date, it's the best *Final Fantasy* on the PlayStation.

SCORE 10 | 10



NBA 2K7

THE BEST JUST GOT BETTER—BY ABOUT 2 PERCENT

| PUB. 2K Games DEV. Visual Concepts
ESRB E MSRP $29.99

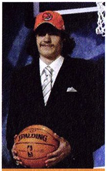
With the PS3 peeking its shiny head around the corner, it should come as no surprise that *NBA 2K7* on PS2 is little more than a carbon copy of last year's tilt. Still, for only $30, you'll be buying one of this console generation's finest sports games, the best basketball game on the PS2, and a chance to see Adam Morrison's cyber-'stache.

2K7 has improved from last year, mind you; it's just that its best new elements are basically pared-down bits from the next-gen version of the game. You'll see signature moves, dunks, and shots from the game's superstars (check out Shawn Marion's uglified ball-flinging to get the gist), but it's a miniscule percentage compared to next gen. Another bonus for this year is that certain big-timers play to their strengths instead of their positions, meaning power forward and 7-foot sharpshooter Dirk Nowitzki won't run the typical power forward AI scheme—he'll take a step behind the 3-point line and throw up a long ball once in a while. But Dirk's one of a few, as this feature is also on a much smaller scale than on the next-gen version. Still, I count the game's biggest improvement as the chance to play with Charlotte Bobcats rookie sniper Morrison. Who doesn't want to bomb shots with a guy sporting a sweet moustache? I know I do!

Even though the improvements are minimal, no other hoops title gives such gravity to every possession. It forces you to play the sport like it's meant to be played: take open shots, even if that means firing up a 15-footer (instead of just lobbing up trifectas or trying to hammer down dunks). The online continues to be brilliant, the shot stick is better than ever, and there's nothing better than stroking a game-tying three (potentially with the mustachioed Morrison) and hearing the raging home crowd scream, "Defense! Defense!" | *Todd Zuniga*

PROS Best basketball game on the PS2, Adam Morrison's moustache, franchise drills are cool.
CONS Little in the way of improvements

SCORE 8 | 10



CARICATURE
CBSSportsLine.com's Matt Rehm once wrote, "With his sweet mustache, floppy hair, and socks pulled high, [Adam] Morrison would have fit right in as a character in *Napoleon Dynamite*." Genius.

WINNER!
In a basketball game in the 1974 regional boys tournament in Sweden, 13-year-old Mats Wermelin scored 272 points to lead his team to victory. Final score: 272-0.

NBA 07 FEATURING THE LIFE VOL. 2

IF ONLY GAMEPLAY DIDN'T MATTER TO VIDEOGAMES

| PUB. Sony CEA DEV. SCE Studios San Diego
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

If it weren't for all the basketball in Sony's new *NBA 07*, I'd give the go-ahead on trying this one out. The storytelling that drives the game's title mode (The Life Vol. 2) is wonderfully executed—from the realistic script to the fantastic voice acting to the emotional twists and turns. But while it's a slam dunk when it comes to narration, it tosses up a big fat air ball every time you're plopped onto the court.

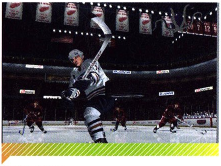
From the camera to the unforgivable bugs, the gameplay is a complete mess. Challenge a guy going to the bucket, and instead of a two-shot foul, your opponent will inbound. Goaltend a shot, and instead of getting two points, your opponent will inbound. Those types of bugs mix with lightning-fast back-and-forth gameplay that resembles hockey more than hoops, which is occasionally fitting: Bump a guy with the ball and he'll slide back half a step as if he's standing on fresh ice. On the plus side, at least the bump won't get the ball handler whistled for traveling.

You'll also see plenty of goofy AI mistakes. A penetrating guard might try one, two, *three!* spin moves to try to break down his man. It's enough to make you peel off and let him through so the court stays vomit-free.

Still, for all the game's double dribbles and subpar graphics, it's not a total bust—a testament to its ambitious story. While it won't supplant b-ball classics like *Hoosiers*, *White Men Can't Jump*, or *He Got Game*, I'm still surprised by how I was drawn through the engaging tale. Does Big W's son win his battle with anemia? Do The Kid and David Jenkins make peace? It's fine melodrama—even though the long load times give you time to wish the gameplay weren't so dreadful. | *Todd Zuniga*

PROS A compelling story, minigames
CONS Awful gameplay, some story-mode challenges are shorter than the load times

SCORE 4 | 10



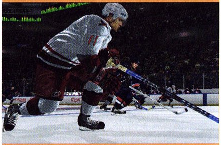
NHL 2K7

EA WINS

| PUB. 2K Games DEV. Kush Games/Visual Concepts
ESRB E10+ MSRP $19.99

For years, the *2K* hockey series had been destroying EA's efforts with ease. Stupid ESPN licensing issues aside, you could always count on *NHL 2K* to be the better game...until now. EA has been making small strides with its *NHL* product over the past few years, and it's finally official: *NHL 07* is a better game than *NHL 2K7*. Viva la competitive market! Is anyone over at the NFL listening?

2K7 just doesn't stack up in most areas. The presentation in particular is bad, with fugly texturing, laughable cardboard-cutout crowds, and animation that stutters during transitions. And the loss of the ESPN license is definitely felt here. Everything looks and feels very amateurish. It's not like *2K* to give us a $20 sports game that *looks* like a $20 sports game.



The actual gameplay is as respectable as always, though I found that the puck takes too many weird bounces in this year's game. The one-timer seems to be way too powerful as well. But the biggest issue with *2K7* is that EA's game introduced the innovative analog stick passing this year, while the *2K* game continues to make the tiny strides in control that it makes every year.

This was bound to happen sooner or later. Like my beloved Pittsburgh Penguins, the *NHL 2K* series is now in a position where it has to regroup and rebuild. And I have no doubts that *NHL 2K8* will be something special. But for this season, pay the extra bucks and go with EA's *NHL 07* instead. | *Greg Sewart*

VERDICT A once-great series in desperate need of restructuring and innovation.

SCORE 5 | 10

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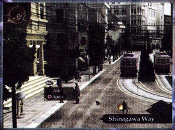

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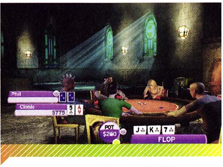


WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP POKER FEATURING HOWARD LEDERER ALL IN

SHORT STACKED

| **PUB.** Crave **DEV.** Point of View
ESRB T **MSRP** $19.99

Weird things happen in poker. This is a given. If you play long enough, you will see things you do not believe. But never before, in all my years of playing poker, have I seen the same two hands shown down not twice, not three times, but *five times*...in a *row.* But in a five-card draw game in *World Championship Poker featuring Howard Lederer All In,* I watched "Milhouse's" trip fives lose to "Camilla's" nines full of aces an astonishing four times in a row.

And to really crank up the weirdness, on the next hand, Camilla mysteriously dropped out, and I looked down at my hand to see two aces and a nine. I was already starting to get freaked out, but when I drew two more nines I knew something was up. Sure enough, I ended up against Milhouse, who showed three fives.

Now, it would be unfair to take this bizarre experience as proof that the tech behind *All In* is in some way flawed. As I said, things happen. But it's certainly not a positive sign for a game that's little more than a graphical overhaul of last year's version.

Oh sure, this year's edition does introduce the Scenario Mode, which throws you into bizarrely specific poker situations with practically no explanation of why the scenarios are significant, and also offers the helpful Turbo Mode, which speeds up play significantly (but still isn't remotely as helpful as *World Poker Tour*'s "fold and skip" option). But aside from those bits, a graphical overhaul, and a bare-bones tutorial mode that can help you learn how to play particular variants of poker, there's not much new here.

Up to this point I've been recommending *Stacked* for the advanced poker player, and *World Poker Tour* for newbies. I don't see any reason to change that recommendation. | *Joe Rybicki*

SHOWDOWN While the nonlinear career mode may appeal to some players, *All In* fails to be exceptional in any one area.

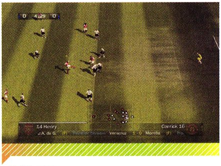
SCORE 5|10

POKER MATH

The odds of being dealt trip fives in a five-card draw game are 1 in 272. The odds of being dealt trip fives five hands in a row are 1 in 1,488,827,973,632. We're not even sure how to calculate the odds of trip fives going up against nines full five times in a row. But we're pretty sure our calculator doesn't go that high....

"ONE-NIL TO THE ARSENAL"

Legendary Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger I am not. Although I took personal control to trounce the hated Spurs and glare convincingly at Chelsea, a mostly quick-simmed season saw me lead Arsenal to a miserable fifth place in the English Premier League. Next season, I'm going to spend less time fostering talent and more time on the pitch.



FIFA 07

SO CLOSE TO WINNING ELEVEN...

| **PUB.** EA Sports **DEV.** EA Canada
ESRB E **MSRP** $39.99

A lesson to chronic underdogs everywhere, *FIFA 07* sets its own terms for victory and then blows the doors off them. Authentic kits and badges for over 510 teams isn't just a nice marketing tagline; being able to play as or against virtually any club that strikes your fancy sweetens the deal almost as much as having the entire world to trade players with in management mode. Managerial choices like careful youth recruitment, player transfers, resting starters before key games, and balancing the desires of the fans and the players will really change your team's performance on the field. And if you throw your manager-mode data on your PSP's *FIFA 07,* you can play with it on the go, even if you're playing with a custom-made club.

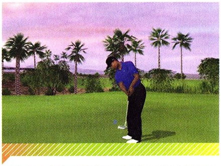
The sheer number of teams and managerial choices available will swamp some gamers, but if you're one of them, you can choose the simpler game types. One choice is the new Interactive League, an online setting where fans of teams from select leagues play fans of other clubs during the real-life matchup periods between the two sides. The aggregate results determine the IL's results, which is a good way to create an online community for club fans, not just online gamers.

The shooting mechanic's changes fail to create the sort of gasp-inducing shots we saw in the World Cup this year, but the other physics and gameplay changes are exactly what an annual sport game's improvements should be. Passes can veer off course, the speed of a player accurately distorts the performance of his moves, and the ball ricochets off heads and chests believably. Fighting for a thrown-in ball is consistently satisfying.

FIFA's weakness continues to be that it lacks the depth of *Winning Eleven*'s controls. That shortcoming makes it too hard to connect to your player, but everything else is excellent. Arsenal striker and French national Thierry Henry looks and plays as he should, and that should be enough for most soccer fans. | *Patrick Joynt*

WENGER ERA Almost nothing's weak—physics, manager mode, and AI tactics are all excellent.
CRAYSTON YEARS It's still not *Winning Eleven.*

SCORE 8.5|10



TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 07

OH TIGER, MY TIGER!

| **PUB.** EA Sports **DEV.** EA Redwood Shores
ESRB E **MSRP** $39.99

I'll start off with the best news about the latest version of *Tiger*: Classic putt controls have returned as an alternative putting option, which means you never again have to find yourself thinking, "I don't care what the putting grid looks like, just tell me where to aim!" before throwing the controller into television in a fit of rage. *Tiger 07* is burning bright with a great set of new events to tackle and the ability to choose between the seminal swing and putt styles or last year's changed versions.

Still, as pleased as I am with the return of the classic putt for lazy days and the updated system for when I want a challenge, it feels like more care went into developing new styles of gameplay and new gear to unlock than into making the golf really feel *perfect.*

The precision required isn't quite that of a sim game, but it's still a lot harder than a straight arcade-style game. It's not a new issue, but with the current gen winding down, I wish we'd seen the controls here really go beyond what we've seen before. It seems like space could have been made to at least include the control scheme that is shipping with the next-gen *Tiger.*

That nit being picked, what's left is a great annual update that disappoints only because of familiarity. The 21 courses and 21 licensed PGA Tour players totally win out over the next-gen offering (the Xbox 360 offers 12 and 15, respectively). And Team Tour lets you assemble an elite team of golfers (through a series of challenges) to take on Tiger and his team of rowdies. It's a lot of fun and makes a lot more sense than last year's weird Tiger time travel. All of the new game modes are a blast, with one-ball's eponymous gameplay being the star. This is a great update, but it could have been stellar. | *Patrick Joynt*

VERDICT This is a great annual update, but innovation could have bammed it up a notch.

SCORE 8|10

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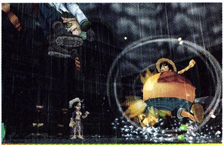


ONE PIECE: GRAND ADVENTURE

NOT QUITE POWER STONE

PUB. Namco Bandai DEV. Ganbarion
ESRB T MSRP $39.99

Fighting games set in wide-open arenas filled with wacky weapons can be awesome, but this one, unfortunately, is not. Even the eclectic cast of the popular manga, with all their wild pirate-kung-fu moves, can't fish *One Piece: Grand Adventure* out of the ocean of mediocrity.

It's not as if the developers didn't make a solid effort at fleshing out the single-player experience. You start out as the manga's main character, the rubber-limbed pirate boy Monkey D. Luffy, but soon you pick up allies who can fight in his stead. Rather than just jump from fight to fight, you sail about the ocean, picking fights on each island you come to.

But once you're in the battles, it's all just a repetitive mess. As you jam on buttons, you quickly get locked into stiff dial-a-combo moves that, more often than not, leave you facing away from your opponents, wide open to attacks from behind. It can be easier to just use some of the items, like giant baseball bats and bombs, that litter the playfield.

You can zip straight through the story battles, or you can tackle minimissions on the world map for more experience points. Each fight has some kind of bonus condition that you can try to attain for extra experience points—finish a fight without jumping, for example, or beat an enemy within a shortened time frame.

Leveling up will earn you new moves. Chaining the X and O buttons in various permutations can produce a wide variety of wacky moves—but since simple button mashing works well enough against the brain-dead enemies, it's unlikely you'll bother learning them. The multiplayer mode might offer some help if there were a four-player mode, but it's only for two. If you're a huge *One Piece* fan, then dive in; otherwise, find an alternative. | Chris Kohler

YO-HO-HO Decent graphics and music, lengthy single-player story
YAAAARRGH Clunky, repetitive fighting, no four-player action

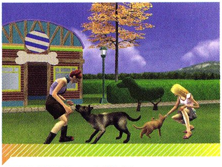
SCORE 5|10

AHOY!

Pirates aren't just for cartoons and Halloween costumes and ye olden days. It is estimated that modern-day pirates hijack between $13 billion and $16 billion worth of loot each year. Yaaaarr!

POPULARITY CONTEST

According to APPMA's 2005/2006 National Pet Owners Survey, the most numerous pet type is freshwater fish (139 million), followed by cats (90.5 million), and then dogs (73.9 million). The least popular type of pet? Saltwater fish, with a mere 9.6 million.



THE SIMS 2: PETS

LIVING IT UP, ANIMAL STYLE

PUB. EA Games DEV. Maxis
ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

Perhaps the Fido or Snowball in your life isn't so big on being stuffed into little sweaters or shoes. But if you can't make it happen in reality, you now have a digital option for pampering animals—the *Sims* franchise has finally brought pets to consoles.

Creating your pets is pretty entertaining in and of itself: There are over 50 breeds of dogs and 20 breeds of cats to choose from, or you can randomly generate a mixed breed (sadly, you can't choose the parentage for that). And thanks to color, fur, tail, and body tweaks, it's pretty easy to re-create your own family pet in the game. You can also accessorize this pet with any number of clothing items, including glasses, shoes, and hoodies. And any game that lets you make a cat wearing a white top hat is deserving of praise.

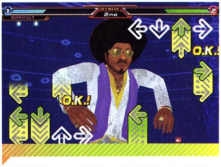
Once you're in the game, your Sim is responsible for training and caring for the pet; success in these areas earn the Sim pet points. You can flip over to a pet's point of view while in the game, but you don't actually have control over their actions. However, it does help you get a gauge on what the pet actually wants at that point. And while I initially thought micromanaging someone who needs to take care of someone else might get somewhat tedious, the pets actually fulfill your social needs, so there is some multitasking going on.

The public space has been modified as well. Now the town square is centered around pet life, and all of the goods up for purchase are for the animals in your Sim's life. The only currency that works here is pet points, which can be used to buy pet treats, pet clothes, pet toys—even more pets. If you find you're running a little low in appreciation from your animals, you can convert simoleans, but the exchange rate (5 to 1) isn't too great.

As for the rest of the game, the structure is still the same as before, but for Sims fans, the pet aspect will add plenty of new entertainment to make this worth picking up. | Dana Jongewaard

PUREBRED Lots of new items and activities, improved loading times
MUTT No real change to the gameplay formula

SCORE 8|10



DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION SUPERNOVA

MORE EVOLUTION THAN REVOLUTION

PUB. Konami DEV. Konami
ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

***DDR* is one** of those franchises that could just go on forever—like *Madden*—delivering a new roster of songs to a niche group of fans who expect little more than the latest Naoki tunes and remixed '80s hits every year or so. But with more interesting music-genre alternatives, such as follow-ups to *Guitar Hero* and *Taiko: Drum Master* on the horizon, it's hard for us more casual fans to justify a $40 purchase for the same ol' game.

But if even if, somehow, *DDR* were to die after this edition of the game, it would leave a pretty good-looking corpse. If nothing else, this is a good version to have on hand, since it incorporates all the same stuff as previous games and adds a few new features. A new Battle Mode is ideal for parties or very competitive friends; the one- or two-player variant is lifted straight from puzzle games: The better you do, the more your opponent suffers with disappearing icons, floods of additional steps, and other craziness. It's not terribly refined, but it's still a fun break from the various main-game modes.

SuperNOVA is also the most friendly *DDR* for newbies and most advanced for veterans. Some modes ease you in to the hard stuff while others challenge you from the get-go, but they're all basically different ways to play the same game *DDR* was five years ago; the most gratifying reward is still unlocking as many songs as you can. Since only about a third of them are available from the start, it takes some time and skill to nail 'em all. And if you're like me and generally suck at using a dancepad, you can always space out to the sweet '80s music videos that make up some of *SuperNOVA*'s game-screen backdrops. | *Jonathan Dudlak*

VERDICT For folks who still get excited about *DDR*, the extra songs and modes in *SuperNOVA* might be worth a purchase. Casual fans shouldn't expect much of anything new.

SCORE 7|10

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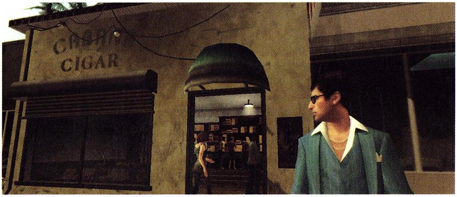
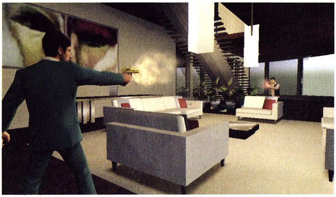
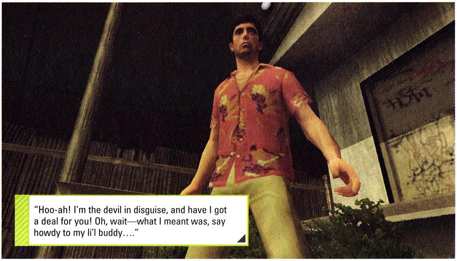
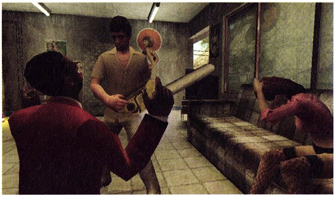






"Hoo-ah! I'm the devil in disguise, and have I got a deal for you! Oh, wait—what I meant was, say howdy to my li'l buddy...."



PUB. Sierra DEV. Radical Entertainment ESRB M MSRP $49.99

SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS

THE WORLD IS YOUR F***ING OYSTER, MENG!

With all the painstakingly detailed and fairly convincing Al Pacino animations created for this game, there is one that is noticeably absent: a digitized portrayal of the actor reaching deep into the territory twixt his legs and grabbing the dangly bits lurking furiously therein. For if *Scarface* is about anything, it is about—and there is really no delicate way to say this—balls. Great big nasty balls so full of unharnessed rage that any babies conceived with the fruit of said gonads would claw their way out of their mother *Alien*-style and shoot the obstetrician. So if you're OK with balls, you're OK with *Scarface*.

The thing with testicles is this: The better your furious little Oscar winner (wiener?) fights his enemies, the bigger they grow as represented by the poetically named "Balls Meter." Once Tony Montana's 'nads are (quite possibly literally) too big for his britches, you can trigger "blind rage," inciting a homicidal spree where this Marielito never misses, enjoys unlimited ammo, and heals himself with every enemy he mows down. So, while you never actually *see* them, you do spend an awful lot of time in this open-world, *GTA*-style game *keeping an eye on* Al Pacino's balls. All I can say is, "Thank you god for not letting Richard Dreyfuss get this part."

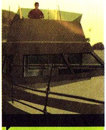
Still, in the context of the game, the Balls Meter makes a certain kind of sense. Picking up almost where the movie left off (Tony miraculously lives instead of dying from the 15 pounds of bullets in his body), Tony vows to claw his way back to the top of the drug world. As Montana says, "All I've got is my word and my balls," and since the game doesn't provide you the opportunity to go around making heartfelt promises, well, there you go. Getting control of Miami means taking over four different turfs, managing a number of fronts, making deals with suppliers, seeking out new contacts, building your rep, smuggling drugs, distributing drugs, paying off vice cops to keep them and rival gangs from cramping your style, manipulating the illegal drug market, and doing a number of other things guaranteed to scandalize your mom. Considering the open nature of the game world, it would seem that *Scarface* offers a bigger, more open playground than the *GTA* games—except it doesn't. It's bloodier and has a dirtier mouth but, as an open-world action game, it's deceptively limited and lacks *GTA*'s wit.

And that's because as well-executed as the all the shooting, driving, and boat-piloting action is, it all occurs in missions that don't offer you any real choice as to how to go about them. There are maybe five basic mission types, and while they're generally fun, they don't give you the opportunity to experiment with solutions, instead just asking you to shut up and do as you're told before rewarding you with money and reputation. This is never more evident than in the midpoint of the game, where your quest to conquer Miami is abruptly hijacked by a series of missions in the nearby islands, which are nothing more than a lengthy and tiresome sequence of uninspired shooting galleries.

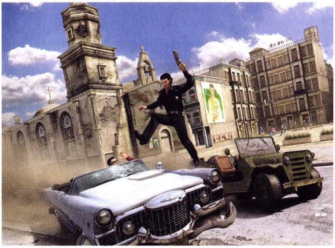
This is a big game, a good 40 to 50 hours long, and those hours are almost all good. But like the over-the-top voice actor gamely imitating Al Pacino, *Scarface* falls just a little short. | Robert Coffey

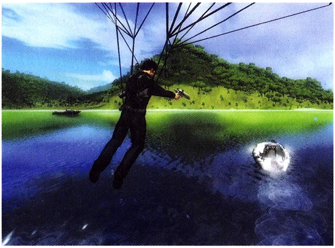
THIS IS THE END A bloodier, ballsier, but limited alternative to *Vice City*.

SCORE 7|10



When Tony Montana grows weary of death and criminality, what does he do? He decorates! The game's reputation system requires you to blow your money on all sorts of expensive junk (in addition to the usable cars and boats) and there's a *Sims*-style decoration system that lets you litter your mansion with all the doodads you buy. Why? God only knows.





VOY Pictures

The urban bits of the game are held in the equivalent of Rio de Janeiro's favelas (think *City of God* but way worse). Check out the documentary *Favela Rising* (www.favelarising.com) for the real scoop on just how ugly South American gang violence can get.

PUB. Eidos DEV. Avalanche Studios ESRB M MSRP $39.99

JUST CAUSE

A REVOLUTION IN SPIRIT BUT NOT EXECUTION

Just Cause's premise—start a revolution and bring down a local dictatorship—is golden. But the rest of this woefully ambitious sandbox catastrophe falls prey to the PS2's limitations. Its first fault is that it's set on the (fictional) gargantuan archipelago of San Esperito, with 390 navigable miles of foliage, water, and mountains—and lots of that stuff repeated over and over. The setting's impressive size should be a selling point, but it ends up being a lot of unthrilling repetition. Trying to navigate toward your destination takes ages, as you'll have to traverse mountains and severely winding roadways that make going from Point A to Point B a huge nuisance. And whatever you do, don't try to roam around on foot. You will throw up. And god forbid that you have your character engage in a gunfight while you're sitting upright. The camera is so nauseatingly jarring that winning a shootout onscreen is a secondary success to staying conscious throughout it.

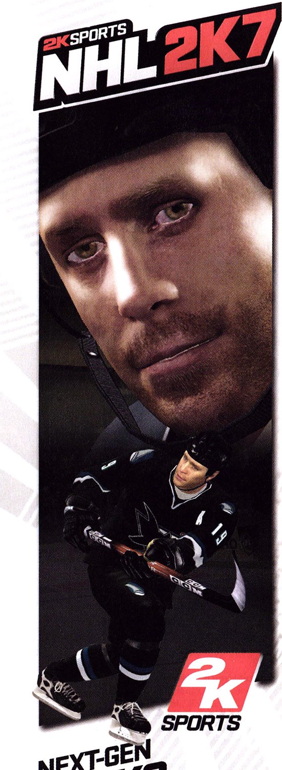
While you're free to steal cars and blow things up, this isn't a *GTA/Mercenaries* mash-up. This game features countless—and unforgivable—missteps. To begin with, the pacing is miserably skewed. You start off doing very boring things that are very far away from each other. If you can stay awake, you'll graduate to semiboring missions that are even farther away from each other. If you're still awake, you can do side missions that are tedious and disinteresting. Also, the shooting mechanic is awful—it makes pulling the trigger in *GTA* seem flawless. And good luck figuring out who's on your side in a firefight, as there's no indication of who's your ally and who's not.

The game's greatest asset is its silliness, which is showcased by using the grappling hook. It can attach to helicopters, planes, and cars, and make you immediately airborne—then you can pop your 'chute and go along for the ride. But it's weird how the grappling hook doesn't work if shot at trees or buildings.

Do your part and make sure the *Just Cause revolución* will not be televised. | Todd Zuniga

PROS Sweet grappling hook, enormous play area
CONS Camera will make you ill, targeting will make you mad, graphics will make you squint

SCORE 4|10



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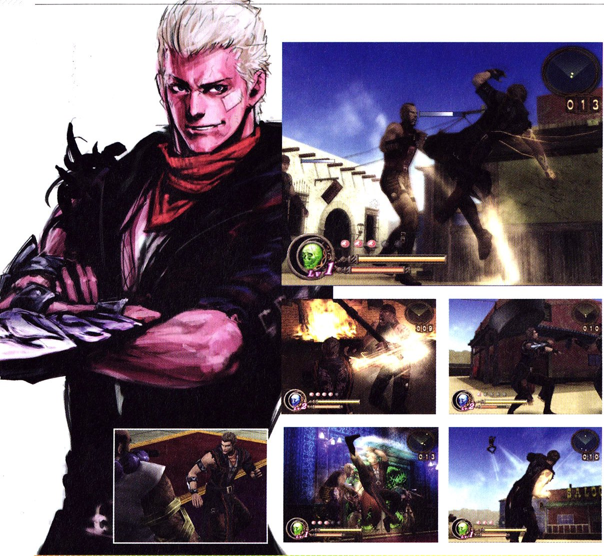


PUB. Capcom **DEV.** Clover Studio **ESRB** M **MSRP** $29.99

GOD HAND

THE BEST WORST GAME YOU'LL EVER PLAY

***God Hand* is a terrible,** terrible game, yet I can't stop playing it. There's just something horrifically appealing about how bad it is in almost every conceivable way. In fact, a car wreck might be an apt comparison for the game since there's some morbid curiosity involved in wanting to see just how bad things get as you progress. Because, really, most of *God Hand* seems to be intentionally designed to take the worst aspects of every brawler ever made and mix them into a repulsive soup.

First, the level design can only be adequately described as leftovers from a circa 1998 first-person shooter level-design contest. Seriously, it's as if Clover thought it would be a good idea to use as little power as possible from the PlayStation 2 to help conserve energy in case of a power crisis. But the mediocrity doesn't stop there. The camera is atrocious due to the fact that it's almost always locked behind the main character. And since he can only turn like an M1 Abrams tank (though there is a 180-degree move that flips him around quickly), there's essentially no way to maneuver about the fighting area in an effective manner.

But this is where the main character's evasive moves come in and the stupid brilliance of *God Hand* shines. The right analog stick gives you four evasive moves, all of which are quite useful in the face of generally terrible movement controls and a lame camera. Actually, knowing how to use these evasive moves properly, along with learning the fighting patterns of individual characters, is what will help you plod through most of the game, should you be willing to endure such torture.

And then there's the combat. Selecting and customizing the main character's attacks and combinations actually matters because one combination may have a huge effect on the types of enemies you're fighting while another may not. It's oddly addictive—coming up with different strategies and trying out new moves in an attempt to see what works and what doesn't—because the AI is just good enough to make it challenging and entertaining. Still, *God Hand* is a guilty pleasure in that it's so embarrassingly poor in its basic design, yet totally awesome in its combat. | Giancarlo Varanini

PROS Why is this combat so addictive? WHY? Offbeat humor is pretty cool.
CONS Just about everything else.

SCORE 7|10

CAPCOM CLASSICS COLLECTION VOLUME 2

RECYCLE, REDUCE, REUSE

PUB. Capcom **DEV.** Digital Eclipse
ESRB T **MSRP** $19.99

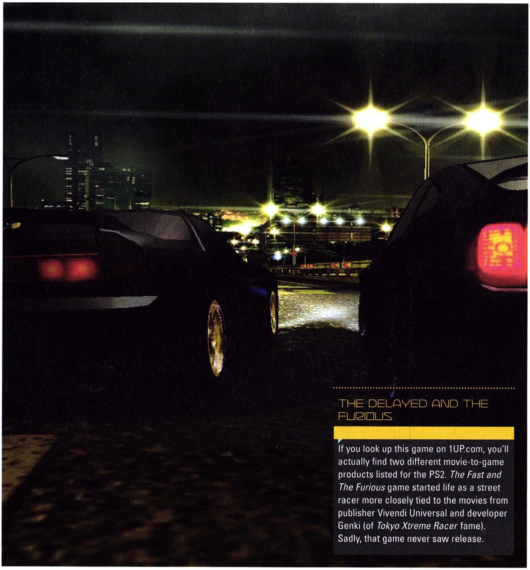
In some ways, you can't help but feel a little miffed at the games included in the second collection of classic Capcom games for the PlayStation 2, particularly if you already own the PSP version of the original collection. Two games that should've been in the original collection (*Captain Commando* and *Strider*) are now thankfully present in this follow-up, along with the very welcome *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*—even if it's not the best game in the series—and *Knights of the Round*, which is essentially like *Final Fight* but set against the backdrop of a Renaissance faire gone wrong as opposed to the mean streets of the inner city.

So, for the most part, the meat of *Volume 2* is comprised of these four games. Much of what makes up the rest of the collection seems more like filler than in the previous collection (with maybe a few exceptions like *Quiz & Dragons*, which is totally awesome if only because there is a dragon that asks you trivia questions about The Beatles). *Eco Fighters*, a happy-go-lucky, we-have-to-save-the-environment kind of shooter, is also fun, as is the classic *The King of Dragons*, which should appeal to old-school arcade junkies. But these aren't quite as notable as some of the games found in the previous collection.

Also, these types of games are generally better suited for the PSP to begin with. Don't get the wrong idea; it's still a very good collection of games. But if you've had the chance to experience one of the collections on the PSP, you can feel right away how much better it is to have these games on the go and be able to pick them up and put them down after a quick dose of *Street Fighter*. | Giancarlo Varanini

PROS Good collection of games.
CONS More filler than that in previous collections, most notable games found in original PSP Capcom collection.

SCORE 7.5|10



THE DELAYED AND THE FURIOUS

If you look up this game on 1UP.com, you'll actually find two different movie-to-game products listed for the PS2. *The Fast and The Furious* game started life as a street racer more closely tied to the movies from publisher Vivendi Universal and developer Genki (of *Tokyo Xtreme Racer* fame). Sadly, that game never saw release.

PUB. Namco Bandai Games DEV. Eutechnyx ESRB T MSRP $39.99

THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS

2 LITTLE, 2 LATE

Back in 2001, a lot of things were different. Vin Diesel had yet to attempt career suicide with *The Pacifier*, pimped-out rice rockets didn't appear in every game under the sun, and EA hadn't yet released *Need For Speed Underground 2*. That last one is the biggest problem facing *The Fast and The Furious*.

Had this game come out five years ago, when the flick itself was fresh and everyone was discovering the whole street racing scene, it would have been incredibly unique and innovative. Traveling around a relatively large city, looking for rivals, partaking in street and downhill drift events, beating various crews to gain the respect of other racers—in 2001, I would have been very excited.

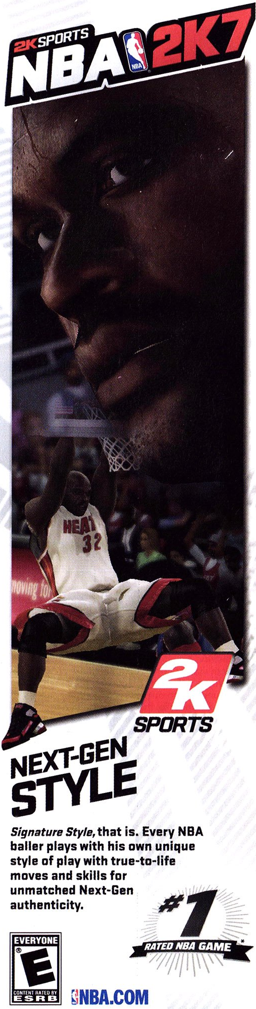
Problem is, *NFS Underground 2* did all this, and better. And that was two years ago now. *F&F* isn't necessarily a bad game—it's actually pretty solid—but it's woefully underequipped in the features department to take on its street racing predecessors. The city is too small, the racing styles too few, and the variety simply nonexistent.

Even the bolt-on parts in *F&F* present a problem. While there are a ton of different ways to improve the performance of your ride, or simply to pimp it out, the interface is very vague and can easily lead you to bolt on a part that'll screw up your vehicle more than help it. Add to that a complete lack of tuning options, such as being able to adjust gear ratios and the like, and you've got one frustrating trip to the garage after another.

I want to like *The Fast and The Furious*, because somewhere under all the excruciating load times and arcade setting menus (I have to load a menu to change my camera angle? Ugh!) lies a solid game. It's a real shame. | Greg Sewart

VERDICT It would have been good if not for a major lack of variety and some awful design choices.

SCORE 5|10



Signature Style, **that is. Every NBA baller plays with his own unique style of play with true-to-life moves and skills for unmatched Next-Gen authenticity.**

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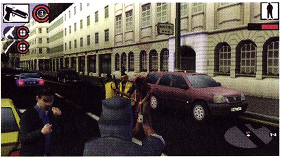
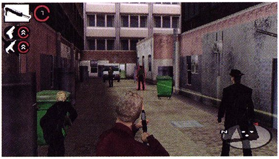
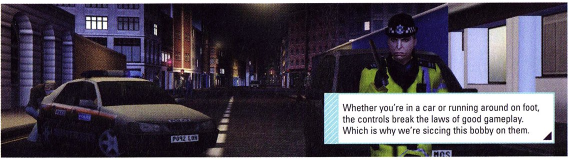
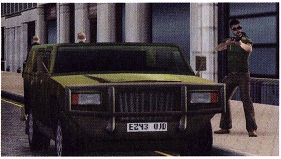
*According to GameRankings.com 2003-2006 average review scores of NBA simulations.

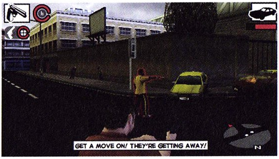






Whether you're in a car or running around on foot, the controls break the laws of good gameplay. Which is why we're siccing this bobby on them.





PUB. Sony DEV. Sony London ESRB M MSRP $39.99

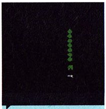
GANGS OF LONDON

TEATIME FOR CRIME

Though America is currently experiencing some of its lowest crime rates in recent history, American entertainment is obsessed with violent crime. Be it the latest WWGG (Where'd the White Girl Go?) kidnapping case pounded into our brains on 24-hour cable-news networks, the popularity (and multiple spin-offs) of gory TV crime drama *CSI*, or the seemingly endless variety of crime-themed games inspired by the success of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, crime is on the minds (if not in the lives) of many in the U.S.

It's so in demand, in fact, that we have to import more. Here, we have a taste of the U.K.'s brand of criminal fantasy life, *Gangs of London*, an open-world underworld game by the makers of *The Getaway*. Besides experiencing the cutlure shock akin to watching a Guy Ritchie film with its strange limey slang, this game just doesn't get America's obsession with the wrong side of the tracks. Where we go for gritty realism (at least to our criminally inexperienced imaginations), *Gangs of London* aims for (or perhaps accidentally hits) absurdity. The world of *Gangs* is one in which racially grouped crime families can't seem to make a run to the supermarket for toothpaste without being caught in a machine-gun ambush in the middle of Trafalgar Square. In this criminal underground, the Russian mob sends the yakuza death threats via text message.

Apart from the cheese factor, *Gangs* simply fails at the basics. Navigating the game's street-by-street reproduction of London via automobile is a disaster, plagued by touchy, overcompensating steering. And once you leave your car, the problem reverses. You pilot your chosen hoodlum (part of several selectable crime families with separate missions) via unresponsive tank controls. Missions are kept at a portable friendly length, a definite plus when you consider that these segments fall into a few types of endlessly repeating scenarios. There are the droning shootouts, the lose-that-cop car-chase getaways, and the rubbish stealth missions, which stretch the game's interface beyond all conceivable limits. Stick to the minigames and the Tourist mode, which lets you explore London without dragging you through the mud. | *Robert Ashley*

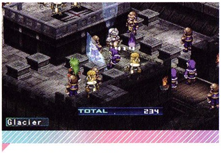


THE POWER OF SIMPLICITY

The best thing about *Gangs of London* may very well be its least assuming feature. Tucked away in the minigames section, "Ye Olde Arcade" is a surprisingly addictive—though monochromatic—distraction that makes a few interesting twists on the old cell-phone standby *Snake*. Kinda sad, really.

VERDICT You'd have to be a rabid Anglophile to spend your crime time in London instead of last year's *Liberty City Stories*.

SCORE 4|10



SPECTRAL SOULS: RESURRECTION OF THE ETHEREAL EMPIRES

THE GHOST OF GAMEPLAY FLOATS SLOWLY

| PUB. NIS America DEV. Idea Factory
ESRB T MSRP $39.99

Three kingdoms are at constant war in the world of Neverland. It's not the most refreshingly original premise ever (and has nothing to do with either Peter Pan or Michael Jackson), but it's nonetheless the setup of *Spectral Souls*, another in a long line of strategy RPGs from NIS America.

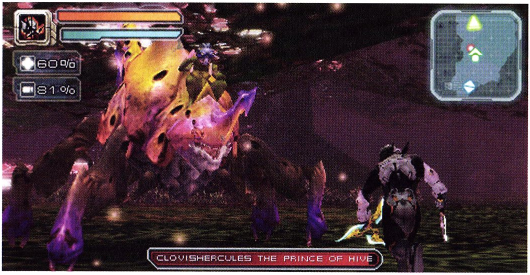
The hook with this setup is that you can play the game from each of those kingdoms' points of view, switching over whenever. You don't see it very often with the same old "warring states" rigmarole of other console RPGs—or at least not done well. And, frankly, this isn't that well done, either. Progression isn't automatic, as you'll have to go into the menu, switch factions, and select the next story when you've done all you can as one group of characters. The game isn't very helpful with letting you know, either: If you've run out of things to do, you might as well move on and see what the other war-torn drama queens are doing.

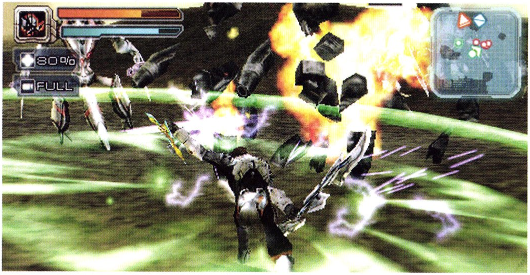
The approach is imperfect, but it's appreciated. It puts more "RPG" into "strategy-RPG," along with little gameplay features like point distribution and the ability to use multiple attacks in one character's turn. Yet what really holds back *Spectral Souls* isn't what's on the outside but what's beneath. The game is plagued with severe slowdown and load times at virtually every turn—even lines of dialogue come in at seconds-long intervals—spilling over into the realm of the ludicrous. For a PS2 port that's mostly 2D to begin with, we weren't expecting the world, but something at least civilized.

If you have superhuman patience to tolerate the technical gaffes, you still have to contend with the dry story, which is full of the anime clichés you can find in numerous other RPGs. Outside studio Idea Factory developed *Spectral Souls* and it shows; NIS would be much better off sticking with its internal developers next time. | *Ray Barnholt*

VERDICT It might be worth it if your tactical mind needs to process everything in slow motion; otherwise the wait for a premier SRPG on the PSP isn't over.

SCORE 3|10





PUB. Namco Bandai DEV. Namco Bandai ESRB T MSRP $39.99

BOUNTY HOUNDS

BUTTON-MASHING FUN

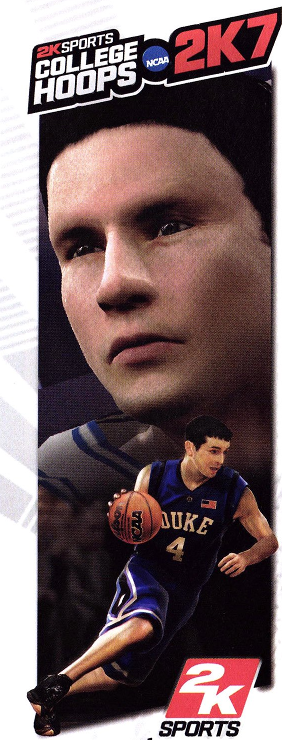
Sure, the mechanical baddies in this action-RPG might be ridiculous—such as robotic spiders holding up Ginsu knives and bosses that resemble vacuuming Roombas—but you can't get around it: This game can be yippee fun. Turning Teddy Ruxpin rejects into scrap metal keeps you coming back for more even when you get bored of leveling yourself up, pimping out your abilities, and upgrading your weapons.

And it's a good thing that the actual combat is so much fun, because the brain-dead missions that have you securing areas by, well, killing all the naughty bots won't have you strategizing or planning your method of attack. You find the red dots on your radar and then wipe their blips off the screen with the helpful use of your very rad sword. Thankfully, the controls are intuitive (although it'd be cool if you could jump around), and weapon switches are simple—when you get bored with a battle-ax, it's supereasy to quickly change to a kick-ass bazooka. And after you've gone amok, pick up the loot and sell the bad guys' droppings to a shopkeeper strangely named Bono. There is enough of a variety of weapons (you can hold onto four at a time), but you'll find yourself sticking to your favorites, as a few weapons are disappointing, like the flamethrower—which you can't aim and looks like you're helping to make s'mores instead of trying to torch bad guys.

You'll also have a blast playing around with the force field feature, which lets you can inflate a bubbled area under which all your stats are increased. There's nothing quite like throwing up your own thunderdome (minus the Tina Turner) and shredding enemies once they've stepped into your invisible arena. And when all this still gets mind-numbing, you can warp to more advanced areas of a stage to give yourself more of a challenge and move at your own pace. | *James Lee*

GOOD Nifty features and simple controls
BAD Poor variety of missions and a bit repetitive

SCORE 7.5|10



NEXT-GEN SKILLS

Coaches preach it, champions exhibit it—*Team Unity.* If you want to taste The Tournament, you'll have to master team chemistry. Without it, your bubble bursts.

#1 RATED COLLEGE BASKETBALL FRANCHISE*

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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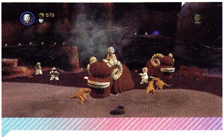


LEGO STAR WARS II: THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY

AN EWOK ADVENTURE

I PUB. LucasArts DEV. Traveller's Tales

ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

What's irritating about most PS2-to-PSP ports is that the PSP versions tend to be significantly inferior, due to things like load times, graphics, or that pesky analog nub. What's pretty refreshing is that *Lego Star Wars II* makes a damn nice jump from the hefty console down to the wee portable. The game plays the same, sounds the same, looks the same for the most part, and even controls the same (the original console versions didn't use the second analog stick).

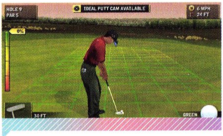
The graphics make a pretty good transition; the only indication that they've been altered at all is that they seem to have gone through some sort of soft-focus filter. Additionally, if you're doing fast stuff like rapid jumps or swinging your lightsaber around you'll spot some ghosting trails, but that might be more of a fault with the hardware than the software.

Another aspect that didn't quite make the transition is *LSW2*'s best feature: co-op. The best part of *LSW2* (besides the opportunity to see thong-wearing stormtroopers) is the ability to play through a level and have fellow *Lego Star Wars* aficionados walk by, drop in to help you out, and then leave to continue about their business. But the PSP version doesn't have that easy entry/exit elegance; to use the ad hoc mode you have to go into the "wireless lobby" in the Mos Eisley cantina and have both players sync up. Then from the cantina you go into the actual game. It's an OK compromise, but it's also a significant one, as co-op play is now something that requires some external planning (it took a couple of tries for my PSP to see Dana's before co-op worked) rather than the carefree method of the console.

While the PSP version has some pretty nice additions (the end parts of levels from the previous game and even more characters), the scaling back of *LSW2*'s best feature makes what would otherwise be a superior version now a slightly inferior package. Which ultimately makes this game like *Return of the Jedi* (turning the Wookiees into Ewoks made that flick not as awesome as it should have been!). I *Thierry Nguyen*

VERDICT Almost better than the console version, if it weren't for the softer graphics and the co-op entry method.

SCORE 7.5|10



TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 07

NEW COURSES AND PLAYERS DON'T FIX THE PUTTING

I PUB. EA Sports DEV. EA Redwood Shores

ESRB E MSRP $39.99

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07 on the PSP nails *most* of what a portable golf game should be, so it makes it all the more distressing when it stumbles. The biggest issue is still with control, which is a mix of problems from the game's design and the PSP itself. Until the mythical PSP redesign happens, though, there's nothing that can be done directly about the single, unresponsive analog nub on the system. With that and the responses from last year's game in mind, EA's designers should have made some allowances.

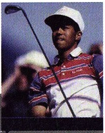
It's difficult to get the right amount of swing on the ball with the PSP nub, even with the aid of the new Swing Path Meter. The meter lets you know that a shot is a fade or a draw, but actually getting the correct shot is still too hard. (There may be some reason why the face keys couldn't function as an alternate right stick during the shot, but whatever it is, it's not a good enough reason.) This is less of an issue as you approach the green, but it's maddening once you're trying to get a putt in. The control's quality falters around this small but crucial bit of bogey-inducing inaccuracy.

Just like last year, that single issue brings down an otherwise amazing title. Virtually every feature only takes a few moments to load, multiplayer includes infrastructure and ad-hoc play, the engine looks a little better, and Game Face has more stuff to play with. The new PGA Tour career mode's calendar nicely balances your time with tournaments and skill tests, and includes the Tour's new playoff format for 2007, the FedEx Cup Championship Series.

Failing to fix the biggest problem of last year's game is the real issue with this release, and that sours all of the improvements a little. Even so, this is an easy update to justify picking up. I *Patrick Joynt*

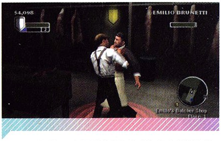
VERDICT A great and worthy update. EA needs to get an alternate control scheme packed in, but *Tiger* still rocks.

SCORE 8|10



SHOWOFF

Tiger Woods' winning ways started when he was very young. In fact, he is the only person ever to win three consecutive U.S. Junior Amateur golfing titles. Overachiever.



THE GODFATHER MOB WARS

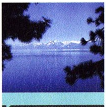
LOST THE MAGIC

I PUB. EA Games DEV. EA Games

ESRB M MSRP $39.99

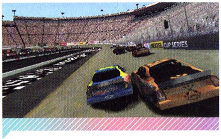
For those of us afraid of ballooning to Brando-esque proportions from sitting all day, the console version of *The Godfather The Game* has gone portable. However, the *Grand Theft Auto*–like game has gone dorky, too: Imagine the Corleones setting up a game of *Magic: The Gathering*. You flip between the kick-ass story mode, where EA did a great job of trimming the tedious missions and kept the extorting, bribing, and excellent fighting controls, and then you have…the Mob Wars card mode. I couldn't get over the tiresome switch from the adrenaline-pumping action of shooting rival families to suddenly having to play a game of *Risk*. I *James Lee*

SCORE 6|10



THAT'S NOT NEW YORK!

The compound where the Corleone family stays is actually located in Lake Tahoe, California, not New York. Of course, Francis Ford Coppola is a California resident, so that kind of makes a little bit more sense.



NASCAR 07

RUBBIN', SON, IS RACIN'

I PUB. EA Sports DEV. Exient

ESRB E MSRP $39.99

I'm impressed with what developer Exient managed to squeeze out of the PSP. This is basically the latest version of the console *NASCAR* title in portable form, complete with 43 cars on the track at one time. But for all the game accomplishes, it doesn't pull off a complete victory. *NASCAR* lacks a rearview mirror option, which is crucial in a game where you're almost constantly surrounded by other cars. The spotter—whose job it is to warn you about approaching vehicles—isn't informative or quick enough to make up for this problem, either, which turns each race into a battle for survival. It makes *NASCAR* way too hard to enjoy. I *Greg Sewart*

SCORE 5|10

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PRODUCTS RANGE FROM RATING PENDING TO EVERYONE 10+
RP–E 10+
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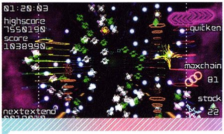


EVERY EXTEND EXTRA

BOMBS AWAY

PUB. Buena Vista Games DEV. Q Entertainment
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

I love puzzle games. Love, love, LOVE them. In fact, I love them so much that I play one game or another almost daily, whether it's while I'm talking on the phone, sitting on the couch watching mindless TV, or putting off my work for just five minutes longer. The games from this underrated genre are a perfect blend of simplicity and strategy. At least, the good ones are.

Every Extend Extra is a remake of a free Japanese flash game that has a confusing and pretty much pointless backstory about bombs and destruction that is nonetheless enjoyable for its abominably bad translation. The basic concept: You have a set number of bombs, and you try to blow up as many enemies as possible with them. After wreaking havoc across the battlefield, you face off against a boss at the end of each level.

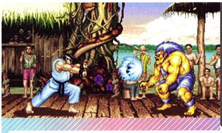
From a visual and audio standpoint, it's readily apparent that this is a Tetsuya Mizuguchi game, with sleek graphics that morph from level to level and cool house beats in the background. One very neat aspect of the game is that the music and gameplay affect each other—as you pick up little bonus dots called "quickens," the music increases in speed, which makes you move faster and also speeds up the enemies, giving you a greater number of objects to blow up.

There's plenty of strategy to be had in this game, but the accessibility bar is a lot higher than one usually sees in puzzle games. And that ended up being a turnoff to me. The tutorial teaches you the basic skills, but it doesn't teach you *why* you're doing what you're doing. As what's happening in the game is not terribly intuitive, this meant that it took me quite a while to get past figuring out the mechanics so I could begin building a strategy.

Some will find this as addictive as *Lumines*, but due to the increased difficulty level and lack of accessibility, *Every Extend Extra* lacks the broad appeal of Q Entertainment's prior titles. | *Dana Jongewaard*

VERDICT Strategic and addictive, but also confusing and tricky.

SCORE 7|10



CAPCOM CLASSICS COLLECTION RELOADED

"RELOADED" IS RIGHT

PUB. Capcom DEV. Digital Eclipse
ESRB T MSRP $29.99

This can never, ever be stressed enough: Loading time can totally ruin an entire gaming experience. Case in point: The three versions of *Street Fighter II* included in *Capcom Classics Collection Reloaded* (original, *Champion Edition*, and *Turbo: Hyper Fighting*) all have that same, incredibly lame loading time that occurs before and after matches. If some effort was genuinely taken to make these particular ports function without loading time—and getting a 15-year-old game to run on the PSP without load time shouldn't be an issue—then it would've made the entire collection all the much better than it already is.

Much like its *Capcom Classics Collection* predecessor, *Reloaded* offers a nice variety of arcade (and some console) classics to choose from, including multiple versions of *Ghosts 'n Goblins* and *1942*. The others may not be as well known as those in the original *Classics Collection*, but they offer many of the same experiences, since Capcom focused heavily on a few key genres—mainly shooters, fighters, and beat-em-ups—in the 1990s. For example, unless you were some sort of big-time arcade junkie, you probably don't know much about *Eco Fighters*, but it's a pretty decent shooter—albeit with a cheesy *Captain Planet* message—with some interesting mechanics that still hold up today.

And, really, that's just one of the reasons this collection is almost as good as the original one. The games are nearly timeless, so many of them hold up as well today as they did 10 or 15 years ago, but part of that is also because they're on a portable system where quick bursts of gaming work best. Additionally, there's a ton extra stuff you can unlock ranging from art to music, so there's no question that, like the last collection, *Reloaded* will keep you glued to your PSP for quite some time. | *Giancarlo Varanini*

PROS Great selection of games
CONS Loading times—arggggh!

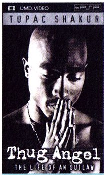
SCORE 8|10

PSP

OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE
GAME OF THE MONTH

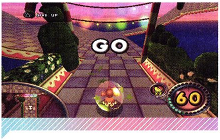
DESPERADO

Back in the day, kids were driven to desperate measures to get money to feed their arcade addictions. One *OPM* staffer even stole $100 once and spent all of it on *Shinobi*. But then that person got struck by a disfiguring disease. Crime never pays.



KIDS AND THE PSP

It's just not a supersound idea. Before age 27, most children are made entirely of sugar and broken electronics. And despite how Tower Records sorts things, *Tupac Shakur: Thug Angel* is not a kids' PSP movie.



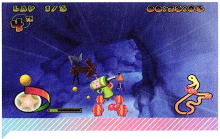
SUPER MONKEY BALL ADVENTURE

TAKE YOUR BALLS ANYWHERE

PUB. Sega DEV. Traveller's Tales
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

Hey, guess what happens when ports are made? Well, you see, a game that's made for one platform gets made for another platform and the features remain largely unchanged. Unfortunately for the PSP, *Super Monkey Ball Adventure* is made only worse by a more cumbersome control setup (which isn't entirely the game's fault) along with some technical problems, such as slowdown, in the adventure mode. The challenge mode makes up for a lot of the shortcomings, since it offers great, classic monkeys-in-balls action that fits perfectly with the PSP's portability, but sadly, it's not enough. | *Giancarlo Varanini*

SCORE 5|10



PAC-MAN WORLD RALLY

TRUST A KID WITH YOUR PSP?

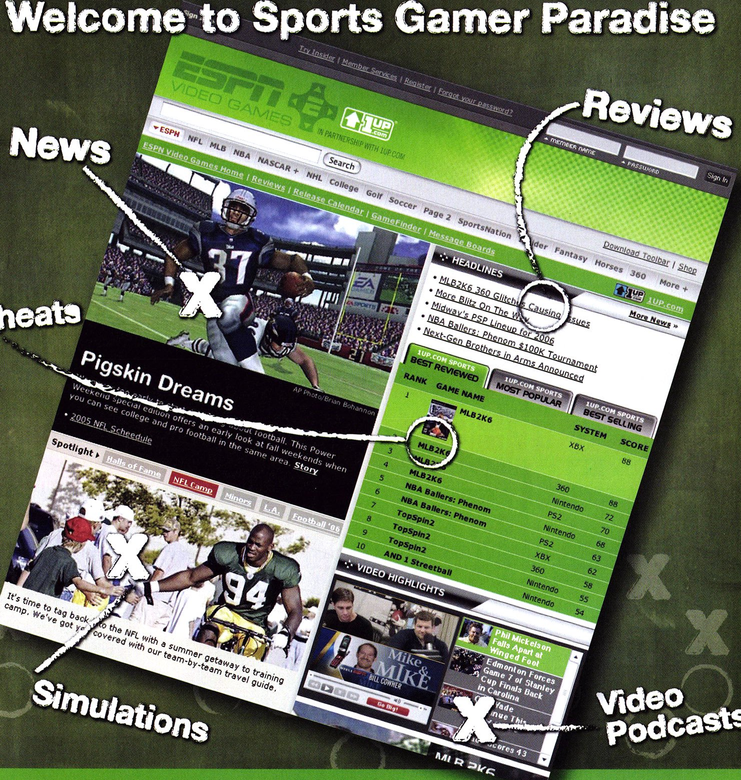
PUB. Namco Bandai DEV. Smart Bomb Interactive
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

If you have kids that you bring on trips and trust with your PSP, then you should rank this game about three points higher. It's a nearly exact port of the PS2 game, making it an inoffensive, if unoriginal, kart racer chock full of Pac-Man characters (and a few Namco surprises). The various tracks still all pop with hidden paths and colorful surprises; battle mode is still a frustrating waste of time. Load times between rounds are slow, and the wireless play is ad hoc only, so it's hard to imagine the adult who would prefer this to the PSP's other (great) racers. But if you trust a kid with your PSP, this is a gem for trips. | *Patrick Joynt*

SCORE 4|10

Check it out:
www.espn.com/videogames

Welcome to Sports Gamer Paradise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- MLB2K6 360 Glitch s Causing ssues
- More Blitz On The W
- Midway's PSP Lineup for 2006
- NBA Ballers: Phenom $100K Tournament
- Next-Gen Brothers in Arms Announced

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RANK	GAME NAME	SYSTEM	SCORE
1	MLB2K6	XBX	88
2	MLB2K6	360	88
3	MLB2K6	Nintendo	72
4	MLB2K6	PS2	70
5	NBA Ballers: Phenom	Nintendo	68
6	NBA Ballers: Phenom	PS2	63
7	TopSpin2	XBX	62
8	TopSpin2	360	58
9	TopSpin2	Nintendo	55
10	AND 1 Streetball	Nintendo	54

Pigskin Dreams

Weekend special edition offers an early look at fall weekends when you can see college and pro football in the same area. **Story**

- 2005 NFL Scheedule

It's time to tag back to the NFL with a summer getaway to training camp. We've got y covered with our team-by-team travel guide.

VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS

Phil Mickelson Falls Apart at Winged Foot

Edmonton Forces Game 7 of Stanley Cup Finals Back in Carolina

Yade
nue This

cores 43

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1UP™ NETWORK

[Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart]

X-MEN: THE LAST STAND

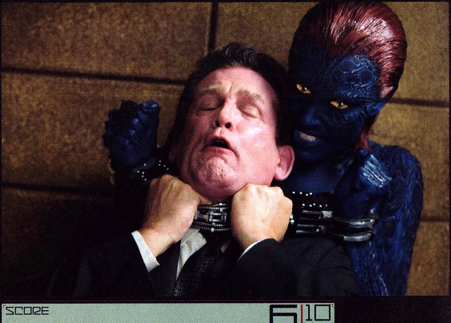
MUTANTS GONE BAD

by John Scalzi

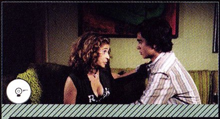
This is the sort of film that you make when you know that no matter what sort of film you make, you're going to have a $100 million opening weekend, so who gives a crap? To that end, *The Last Stand* is superficially all about giving the kids what they want: new favorite X-Men (most notable here is Kelsey Grammer's turn as The Beast), a thin veneer of plot that nods in the general direction of the idea of mutants being a persecuted minority—this time it's about a cure for mutantism, which may or may not be forced on the mutants—and then lots and lots of going kerplooey. But go any deeper into it, which real X-Men fans will, and you discover *The Last Stand* has a mutant power of its own, and not a good one: the ability to be completely hollow on the inside.

Part of this, I suspect, is simply the problem of doing too much all at once: The film wants to deal with the problem of Phoenix (aka the resurrected Jean Grey, who is very emphatically not the nice girl she was before), but it also wants to have the "mutant cure" plot too, and jamming the two of them together into a Frankenstein monster of a story line doesn't do much for either. It also doesn't help that, as Phoenix, Famke Janssen is largely confined to dressing up in a ren-faire ensemble and scowling darkly. The rest of the cast seems largely lost as well; Hugh Jackman is reliably cranky as Wolverine, but, despite his character's established loner vibe, he really can't carry the film all on his own.

The movie offers not one but two egregiously loose threads that threaten the eventuality of *X-Men IV*; let's hope that if a fourth film *does* come into being that its mutant power is a script that can make the rest of us give a damn.



SCORE 6|10

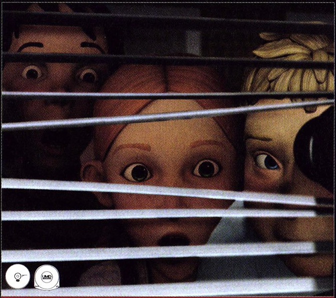


ART SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

Max Minghella, John Malkovich

Terry Zwigoff and Daniel Clowes, who brought *Ghost World* into being, thus giving 19-year-old po-mo freaks something to quote, are back at it again with another suitably arch and arty little flick. This one takes place at an art school where there's a serial killer but, more importantly, the students and the teachers snark in that overeducated, underfunded way that defines 21st century American intelligentsia.

SCORE 7|10



MONSTER HOUSE

Steve Buscemi, Maggie Gyllenhaal

Monster House (about three 12-year-old kids who discover that the house across the street is alive—and evil) was created using the same motion-capture technology used on *The Polar Express*. That flick was on the wrong side of Uncanny Valley—all the characters looked like they'd been Botoxed into insensibility—but this time they got it right: The computer-animated kids here are slightly exaggerated to make them just cartoony enough not to be creepy, and their faces are amusingly expressive. Technology stumbles forward, it does.

The movie is now my 7-year-old's favorite film, probably because it's like the kiddie coaster at the state fair: spooky enough to give her a thrill without being genuinely scary. I liked it for the same reasons and because there were just enough throwaway lines to keep me interested as an adult.

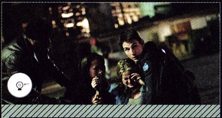
SCORE 7.5|10

THE BREAK-UP

Jennifer Aniston, Vince Vaughn

You know, I saw this movie the first time, when it was called *The War of the Roses*, and that film is so much better than this film that I recommend you stop reading this and go watch *Roses* right this very second. As for Aniston and Vaughn, I spent all my time going, "Yeah, but these two are so totally dating in real life." This film was not nearly enough to distract me from pointless tabloid headlines. Which means it's failed.

SCORE 5|10



MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III

Tom Cruise , Phillip Seymour Hoffman

This movie is a perfectly cromulent action film that piles up all the excitement in all the right places, but the expiration date on Tom Cruise's sanity seems to have zoomed right by, and (not unlike *The Break-Up*) you spend your time wondering just what the deal is with him and Katie and whether their kid will *ever* be normal. Oh, for the days when studios were powerful enough to keep their actors' weirdness out of the news.

SCORE 7|10

THE OMEN

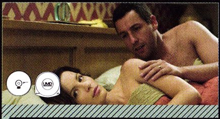
Liev Schreiber, Julia Stiles

You know, it's not that I don't like Liev Schreiber and Julia Stiles, but watching the two of them go through the same paces in this remake as Gregory Peck and Lee Remick (who were realistically aged for their roles) did in their original is like watching your 7-year-old walk around in your sneakers. In fact, this entire remake feels like it's walking around in the original film's sneakers, which isn't a good thing when it's trying to scare your socks off.

SCORE 6|10

MOVIE RELEASES

October 3
X-Men: The Last Stand
October 10
Art School Confidential
Click
October 17
The Break-Up
The Omen
Over the Hedge
October 24
Nacho Libre
October 31
Mission: Impossible III
Monster House



CLICK

Adam Sandler, David Hasselhoff

If only I could have used the magical remote in this film to fast-forward through the time I spent watching it! Oh, don't mind me, that's my reflexive disgust at all things Adam Sandler kicking in. Actually, as Sandler flicks go, this one is perfectly passable: a nice plot gimmick, some amusing moments, and a heart tug or two as the hero wises up that fast-forwarding through life ain't ideal. You're done, thanks, see you next year, folks.

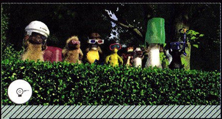
SCORE 6.5|10

NACHO LIBRE

Jack Black, Héctor Jiménez

Jack Black's a Mexican monk who wrestles lucha libre–style to save an orphanage. That's the pitch line, and you can just see some studio stiff getting all sweaty over it. That's because Jack Black exists at that blessed stage in his career where just showing up makes people laugh. See, watch: Hey! Jack Black! And now you're smiling, aren't you? This is a good thing, because without Black's tubby star power, this silly flick's got very little going on.

SCORE 7|10



OVER THE HEDGE

Bruce Willis, Steve Carell

The best of the various "bunches of animals do allegedly amusing things" animated flicks this year, because the animals here actually are amusing, thanks to a nice setup (woodland animals meet suburbia, complete with SUVs and trash piles), some sharp gag writing, and a vocal cast that's spot-on (Nick Nolte as a bear? Genius!). It's not brilliant, just fun. But you know what? Sometimes "just fun" is exactly the right thing for a film to be.

SCORE 8|10

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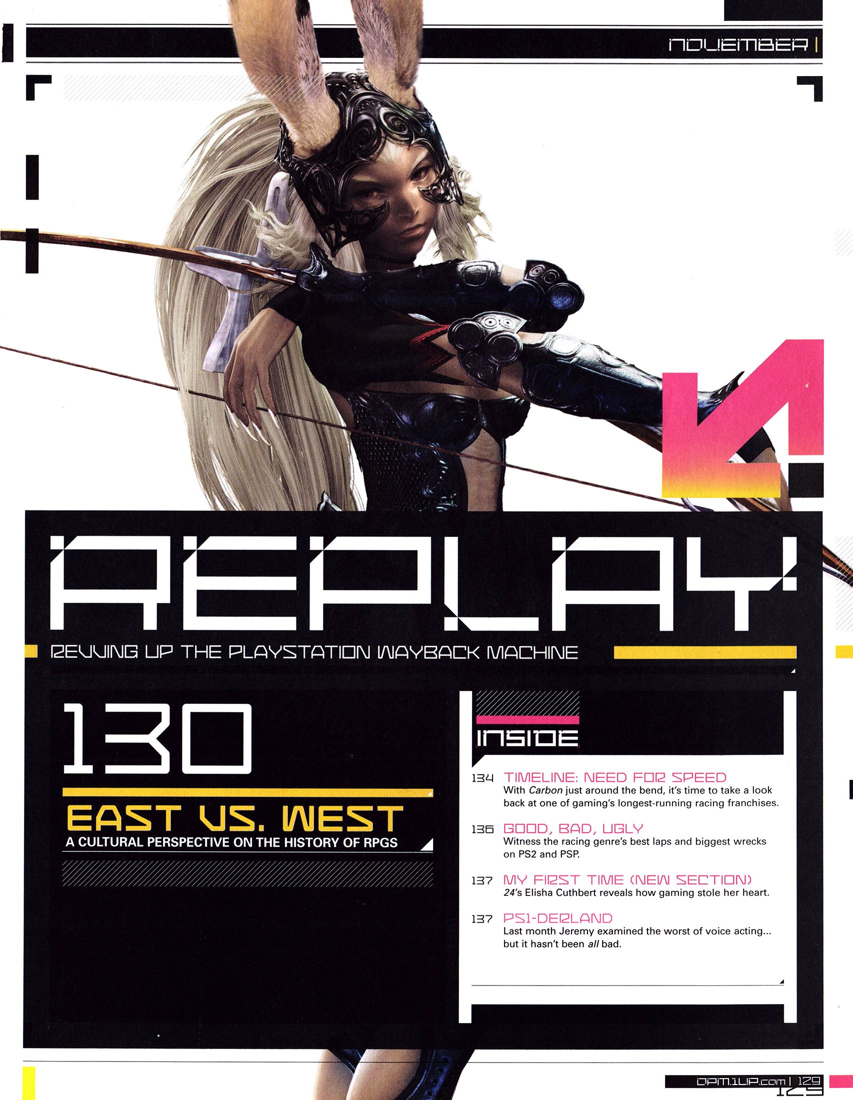

REPLAY

REVVING UP THE PLAYSTATION WAYBACK MACHINE

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EAST VS. WEST

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE HISTORY OF RPGS

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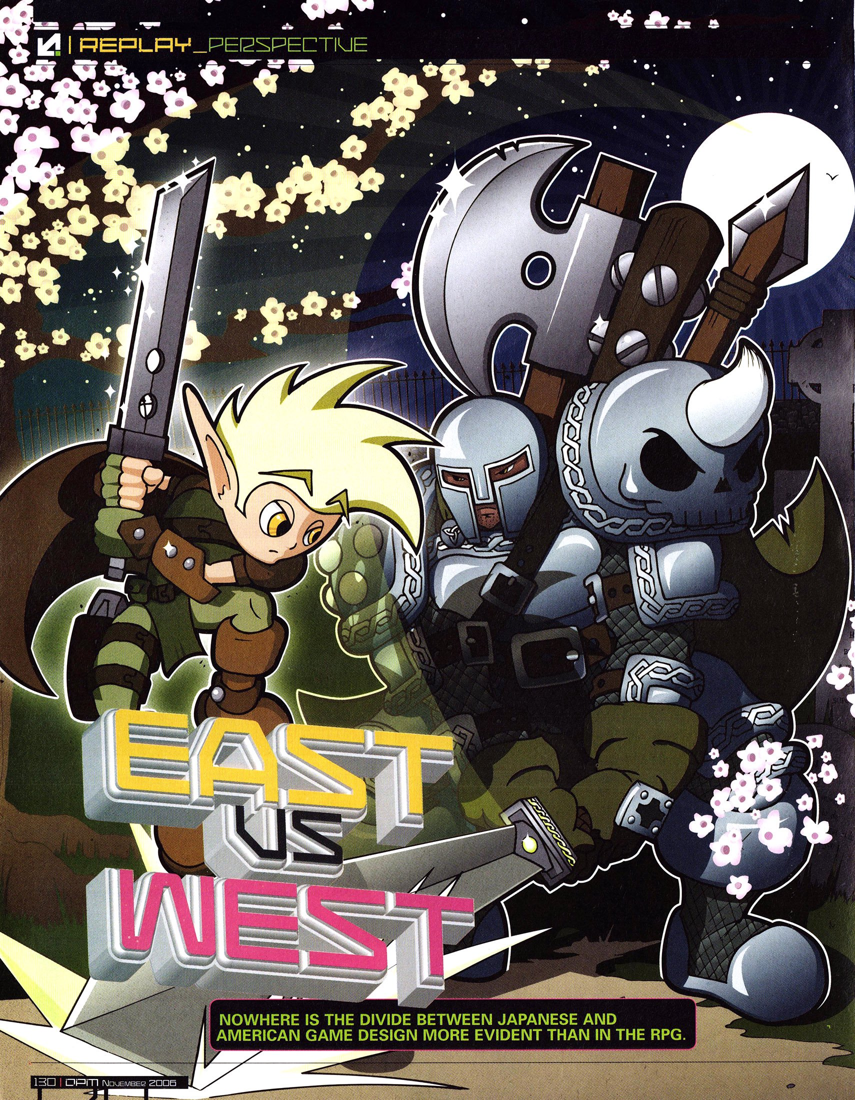
With *Carbon* just around the bend, it's time to take a look back at one of gaming's longest-running racing franchises.

136 GOOD, BAD, UGLY
Witness the racing genre's best laps and biggest wrecks on PS2 and PSP.

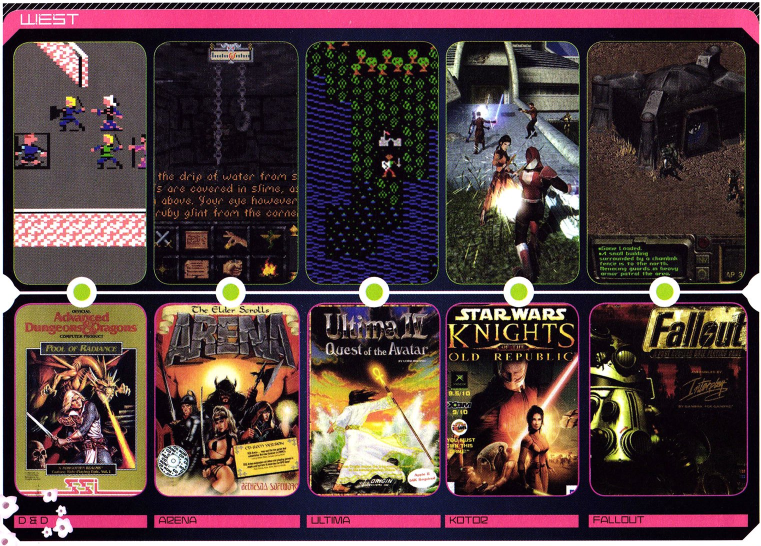
137 MY FIRST TIME (NEW SECTION)
24's Elisha Cuthbert reveals how gaming stole her heart.

137 PS1-DERLAND
Last month Jeremy examined the worst of voice acting... but it hasn't been *all* bad.



EAST VS WEST

NOWHERE IS THE DIVIDE BETWEEN JAPANESE AND AMERICAN GAME DESIGN MORE EVIDENT THAN IN THE RPG.



the drip of water from s
s are covered in slime, a
above. Your eye however
ruby glint from the corne

•Game Loaded.
•A small building surrounded by a chainlink fence is to the north.
Menacing guards in heavy armor patrol the area.

We like *GTA* and football. They like *Animal Crossing* and the *other* kind of football. The Xbox 360—a hot ticket here—languishes on their shelves while their retailers struggle to keep the quirky DS Lite and its bumper crop of educational and instructional software in stock.

It's hardly news that America and Japan are like night and day when it comes to tastes in videogames, but the differences are even more pronounced when it comes to RPGs. Aside from a shared fascination with the primping pretty boys of *Final Fantasy*, our two nations define "roleplaying" as two very different creatures. Here, they're enormous, open-ended adventures in which the story is loosely presented and players are free to progress as they see fit—just like in the old days of tabletop RPGs, when the dungeon master determined the plot and outcomes were settled with a roll of the dice.

In Japan, though, an RPG is something completely different. You have your character stats and your experience points. You may have familiar character classes and even beasts to battle straight from TSR's *Monstrous Compendium*. There could be dungeons to spelunk and townsfolk to assist, too. But those elements ultimately serve as mere window dressing for largely linear adventures in which plot, not the player, determines the game's outcome, direction, and pacing.

Despite sharing a common root—namely, *Dungeons & Dragons*—the RPG creations of the U.S. and Japan demonstrate very different ideas of what precisely it means to play a role. For American developers, it means affording players the opportunity to take control of a hero and determine the game's final outcome through exploration and effort, even if the player's path leads them far from the core story line.

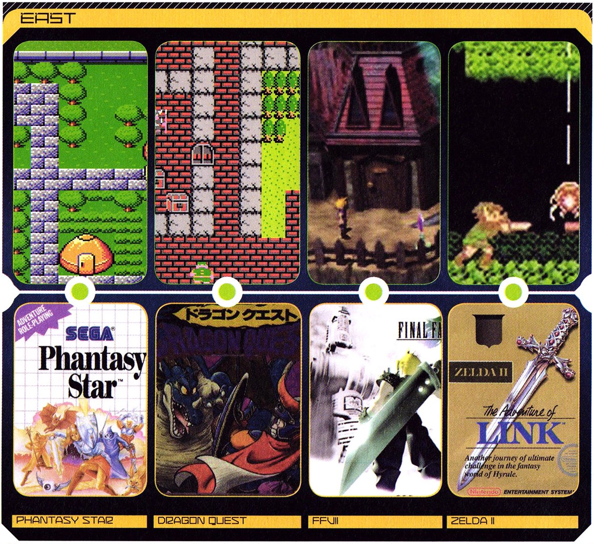
Take Interplay's *Fallout*, one of the most highly regarded Western RPGs of the past decade. It allows players to create and customize a character, form allegiances, take on jobs and bounties—all of which are tangential to the main story, which involves a hero's quest to save his "hometown" from imminent drought. But the path to completing that task is left to players to determine.

Compare that to JRPG juggernaut *Final Fantasy VII,* which, after nine years, remains the single most popular RPG in the world. *FFVII* certainly has its share of optional side quests and out-of-the-way secrets to discover, but the bulk of the game remains the same for every playthrough: Players always take the role of Cloud Strife, Aerith always bites it, there's always an ultimate showdown with Sephiroth, and all the points in between are the same. Stat growth follows the same pattern every time (aside from minor adjustments made by certain Materia) and none of the characters possess unique or intrinsic abilities outside of the simple Limit Break skills.

In short, the Japanese approach to roleplaying is the fundamental opposite of American design: Players step into the shoes of a hero whose (typically complex and twisting) story has already been determined. It's the difference between being the director and being an actor—between creating an experience and experiencing a creation.

This wasn't always the case; the earliest Japanese RPGs such as Falcom's *Dragon Slayer* had much in common with their Western counterparts. But American role-playing games have always been a predominantly PC-based genre. The PC has never been a significant factor in the Japanese gaming market, likely because the dominant PC standards—Windows, Mac OS, and Linux—are of Western extraction, and Japan has always been somewhat resistant of non-native gaming systems.

Just as U.S. RPGs started to get good—the golden age that began with 1985's *Ultima IV* and continued through the early '90s—Japan developed its own gaming platform, the Famicom (known in the U.S. as the NES). For a while, simplified versions of American hits like *Ultima*, *The Bard's Tale*, and even *Pool of Radiance* made their way onto the NES…but before



THE OTHER RPGS

Aside from these two design styles, there's the MMORPG, which is very much its own creature in more ways than one. Like the traditional role-playing game, MMORPGs were born in America but have taken on a life of their own in another territory. But in this case, the "other territory" is South Korea—home of such diverse and popular creations as *Ragnarok Online*, *MapleStory*, and *Lineage II*. Meanwhile, Japan's only significant MMO creation to date is the modestly popular *Final Fantasy XI*.

long, it became apparent that games designed for a PC's keyboard interface fared poorly on the two-button NES controller. But games built for the NES—*those* were perfect.

1986's *Dragon Quest* ushered in a new era of RPG design: streamlined games offering a limited command set and colorful, tile-based graphics. The gameplay was simpler, ideal for the younger console market, and anything like openness of design was largely abandoned in favor of a more focused, linear story. American RPGs continued to grow more open and immense, while their Eastern competition became more stylized, more idiosyncratically *Japanese*. *Phantasy Star* added anime-style cut-scenes, while CD-based RPGs like *Cosmic Fantasy* and *Lunar* went a step further by incorporating actual anime. It wasn't until the advent of the original PlayStation that Japan's RPG output truly hit the American mainstream, as, for the first time, the games were as lovely as they were immense.

The PC/U.S. and console/Japan dichotomy is still very much in effect, as Windows remains the domain of Western RPGs, with a few small exceptions, and consoles are still home to RPGs of Japanese design.

And each format has both strengths and weaknesses. American RPG design offers far more immersion and depth, while JRPGs generally have more engrossing stories and varied settings. Still, the Eastern brand of roleplaying seems to have the edge in terms of popularity, due in large part to sheer numbers.

Despite the limitations of the console-based games (or perhaps because of them), Japanese RPG developers tend to be far more prolific than their American peers. Freed from tweaking and balancing the thousands of variables introduced by free-form adventuring, they can produce RPGs quickly...and they can spin the genre into entirely new forms. As a result, console RPGs range from the plodding, FPS-like *King's Field* to the speedy *Tales of the Abyss;* from the neoclassical *Dragon Quest VIII* to the avant-garde *Devil Summoner*; from single-character Roguelikes (*The Nightmare of Druaga*) to the 108-character *Suikoden* epics. Not only does the format play host to games as diverse as laser-focused dungeon crawls and sprawling tactical RPGs, sometimes they even come from the same team (as in the case of *Vagrant Story* and *Final Fantasy Tactics*, both Squaresoft creations).

DRAGON QUEST USHERED IN A NEW ERA.

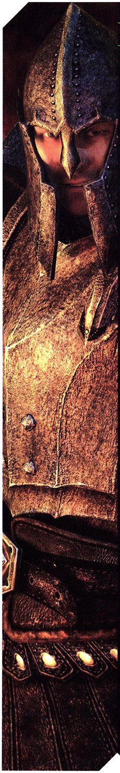
Still, the walls are coming down. As consoles and PCs grow more alike and massively multiplayer online RPGs make Windows unfriendly territory for solo RPGs, the amount of cross-pollination between the two formats has increased. BioWare's *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and *Jade Empire* offered open-ended morality-based gameplay on the Xbox. Even more recently, Bethesda's colossal *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* launched simultaneously on the PC and the Xbox 360, and it's headed to the PS3 this fall.

Still, these RPGs are very Western in feel. Perhaps the true happy medium in this clash of cultures may come courtesy of the latest chapter of that most Japanese of RPG series, *Final Fantasy XII*. Though story-driven to the end and populated by a cast of clearly defined characters, *FFXII* offers much of the flexibility (not to mention the immediacy of gameplay) typically seen in Western games. There's even a hint of MMO about it.

Of course, there's no telling whether or not *FFXII*'s best-of-both-worlds approach will catch on. At this point, all we can really tell about its sequel, *FFXIII*, is that it's completely insane. | *Jeremy Parish*

PRIME MOVERS

The RPG may have been created in America, but Japan has its own very specific take on what the genre is all about. With the arrival of *Dragon Quest* in 1986, the JRPG was born, and the two schools of design have grown further and further apart. Here are some of the key titles that have defined each nation's role-playing experiences:



AMERICAN

Ultima (1981, PC): The game that started it all, *Ultima* spanned the cosmos and featured first-person perspective dungeons…all in minimal black and white.

Wizardry (1981, PC): More limited in scope than *Ultima*, *Wizardry* focused heavily on dungeon crawling...and has since become far more popular in Japan than in America.

Ultima IV (1985, PC): A massive leap for the genre, the fourth *Ultima* emphasized morality and character interaction over simple combat.

Rogue (1986, PC): The minimalist ASCII graphics belie the amazing depth offered by *Rogue* and its descendants.

AD&D Gold Box (1988, PC): SSI's PC-based RPGs (such as *Pool of Radiance*) were true to the *Dungeons & Dragons* license and marvelously crafted to boot.

The Elder Scrolls: Arena (1994, PC): An immersive 3D RPG with immense freedom in an equally enormous world. The fourth chapter, *Oblivion*, is a game you may have heard of.

Fallout (1997, PC): *Fallout*'s dystopian future was paradise for gamers with an open structure and flexible character building.

Shadow Madness (1999, PS1): America's first significant JRPG-alike, created by ex-Square employees, set the tone for the rest: It was pretty bad.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (2003, PC, Xbox): BioWare combined their RPG expertise, the moral dimension of *Ultima IV*, and the sheer radness of *Star Wars* for this brilliant adventure.

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006, PC, Xbox 360, PS3): Mixing open-world gameplay with old-school sensibility, *Oblivion* has revived the classic U.S. RPG ethos in a major way.

JAPANESE

Dragon Slayer (1984, PC): Falcom's loosely knit series was Japan's first major RPG creation, an action-oriented take on the genre later refined in the *Ys* games.

Dragon Quest (1986, NES): Possibly Japan's most beloved series, *DQ* distilled RPG dynamics into something simple, accessible, and attractive.

Final Fantasy (1987, NES): The original *Final Fantasy* felt like *D&D*, streamlined: Players could choose character classes and travel the world, but the progression was strictly linear.

Phantasy Star (1987, SMS): *Ultima*-esque in its multiple gameplay perspectives, Sega's *Phantasy Star* nevertheless featured anime sequences that hinted at cinematic RPGs to come.

Zelda II (1987, NES): *Zelda II* was actually more of an RPG than its predecessor, with experience points, magic and sword skills, and random encounters—the father of the action-RPG.

Mysterious Dungeon (1993, SNES): Drawing heavily on *Rogue*, Chunsoft's series of dungeon crawlers feature simple visuals and friendly mascot characters—disguising hardcore challenges.

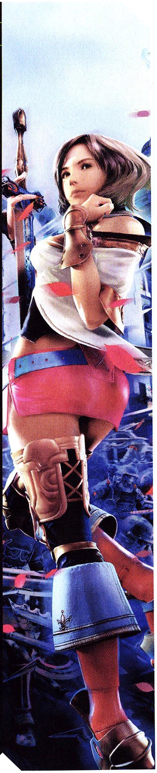
Super Mario RPG (1996, SNES): Mario's role-playing debut fused platform gaming with the RPG, creating an even more simplified, action-oriented take on the genre.

Tales of Phantasia (1995, SNES): Wolf Team went a step further, adding real-time battle controls and fighting-game-inspired input techniques to create exciting combat.

Final Fantasy VII (1997, PS1): *FFVII*'s mix of 3D graphics and seamless movies defined RPGs for a generation: flashy affairs with linear gameplay offset by impenetrably dense plotting.

Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter (2003, PS2): This underappreciated gem turned JRPG conventions on their heads, emphasizing repetition and failure as the keys to progress.

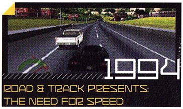
Final Fantasy XII (2006, PS2): Ambitious and beautiful, *FFXII* just might pull off its lofty goal: to marry all the conventions of American, Japanese, solo, and MMORPGs in a single, cohesive package.



NEED FOR SPEED

Neither humble beginnings nor ill-fated spin-offs could detour gaming's most powerful racing franchise

Need for Speed is a staple of the racing genre today, but virtual speed freaks may be surprised to learn that the series started life as the flagship racing game of a doomed system—former EA owner Trip Hawkins' ill-conceived 3DO Multiplayer. Now that the franchise is over a decade old, it officially qualifies for one of *OPM*'s trademark retrospectives. (Note that we're skipping the handheld versions of the games because, honestly, they've never offered anything new.) Let's begin!



1994

ROAD & TRACK PRESENTS: THE NEED FOR SPEED

Originally released for the doomed 3DO system, *Need for Speed* was Electronic Arts' attempt to take console driving games in a different direction; namely, it was a simulator that featured real cars, each with its own unique handling model. Players could jump in any of a handful of exotic dream cars that looked, sounded, and drove relatively authentically, thanks to the involvement of the *Road & Track* folks.

But that wasn't the only unique part of *NFS*. According to EA associate producer Scott Nielsen, "*Need for Speed* also had the first pursuit mode that allowed players to test their racing skills as police cruisers followed in chase mode."

Need for Speed was later released on the PlayStation and Sega Saturn, but it was a drastically different game. "Focus testing on the original 3DO version showed that, although people enjoyed the realistic physics model, the game felt too slow and lacked a sense of speed and adrenaline that was expected when driving some of the fastest cars in the world," says Nielsen. Thus the arcadey-er *NFS* was born.

1997

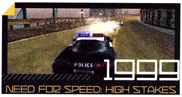
NEED FOR SPEED II

The PlayStation and Windows platforms enjoyed a twitchier, arcade-style *Need for Speed* built from the ground up. Hardcore sim fans were disappointed that *Road & Track* was no longer involved in the process, but its contributions lived on. "When we launched the *NFS* franchise we felt having the automotive experience of the *Road & Track* team behind the product would give it authenticity and credibility among car enthusiasts," says Nielsen. "We achieved this goal with the first product, and in subsequent *NFS* products the individual car manufacturers we partnered with took on this role."

Here's a bit of trivia for you: *Need for Speed II* was the first PlayStation game to take advantage of the dual analog, DualShock, and NeGcon controllers all in the same product. Hardcore, baby.

NEED FOR SPEED III: HOT PURSUIT

Hot Pursuit introduced a couple of features that have become mainstays not only in the *NFS* series, but in the genre in general. Being chased by the cops was the main game mechanic in this third title, as was finding and utilizing shortcuts on each track. *Hot Pursuit* also allowed players to get behind the wheel of a black-and-white and give chase to virtual lawbreakers.



NEED FOR SPEED: HIGH STAKES

Though *High Stakes'* major contribution to the overarching series was actually its career mode—again, another staple of the franchise and genre—the most interesting bit about the fourth *NFS* was racing for "pinks."

That's right, long before movies like *The Fast and the Furious* or television shows like *Pinks* made it a mainstream phenomenon, putting your car on the line was a regular feature in *Need for Speed.* Lose the race; you lose your ride. The PC version's online play made this mode especially exciting.

NEED FOR SPEED PORSCHE UNLEASHED

Unlike previous games in the series, *Porsche Unleashed* put the spotlight on a single car manufacturer and attempted to give gamers a virtual history lesson. Nielsen assures us, however, that this was never meant as a shift in direction for the *NFS* franchise: "It wasn't meant to be a turning point nor philosophy change for the franchise; it was really an opportunity for us to feature a complete history of all the cars that Porsche had released so players could learn more about one of the greatest automobile manufacturers in the world in *Need for Speed* style."

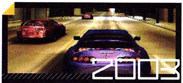
Though the game didn't fare as well as its multimanufacturer predecessors, it was nevertheless a fine way to end the series' run on the original PlayStation.

NEED FOR SPEED HOT PURSUIT 2

The transition to a brand-new system brought a one-year hiatus for the *Need for Speed* games. The result was *Hot Pursuit 2*, the culmination of just about everything good in the series to date. Everything came together perfectly—fantastic track design, a lightning-quick sense of speed, wonderful soundtrack, and great graphics. It remains one of if not the best *NFS* ever made.

At least on the PlayStation 2.

The PC, Xbox, and GameCube games, however, were pretty hurtin'. Nielsen explains, "Without getting into too much detail, the simple answer is: two different development teams, two *drastically* different time frames to complete the game. I think the PS2 version is widely regarded as the superior product; however, given the circumstances that the other team faced, I think they did a great job." We'll spill the beans, though. The other development group was EA Seattle.



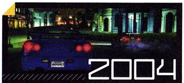
NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND

Underground marked the death of the classic *Need for Speed* formula, eschewing expensive, exotic sports cars for the illegal street racing scene and a stable of mostly Japanese import tuners.

Says Nielsen, "Near the end of developing *NFS Hot Pursuit 2* we sat down and evaluated what game we should build next. We started to explore other ideas that could be interesting but [would] remain true to the core concept of *Need for Speed*, which has always been 'real cars, real fast.' Typically that has meant high-end, exotic European sports cars.

"When we looked around at what was popular in the car scene it was obvious that...we needed to go in the direction of 'tuner' cars. Even though everyone aspires to own a Ferrari, Lamborghini, or Porsche, the reality is that most of us will never have the cash to park a car that can cost upward of $1 million in our garage, let alone get behind the wheel. Instead, today's kids are building their own 'urban exotics'—cars that are relatively inexpensive to buy and then modifying the s*** out of them, a little bit at a time, to create highly tuned, high performance sports cars."

Oddly enough, *Underground* didn't include a pursuit mode, traded instead for the ability to modify and bolt-on performance and visual upgrades to the cars.

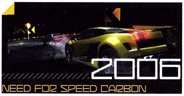


NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

Underground 2 continued to expand on the ground broken in *Underground*, including a few new race modes, the addition of SUVs to the vehicle roster, and a whole slew of more bolt-on parts to play around with. It also introduced a free-roaming, *GTA*-style game interface where players were tasked with driving around the vast city looking for events and other hot spots to further their careers.

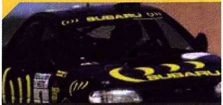
NEED FOR SPEED MOST WANTED

Most Wanted represents yet another evolution of the series, or maybe devolution, depending on how you want to look at it. Take the free roaming and car customizing of *Underground*, add the police pursuits from the *Hot Pursuit* games, mix in a very linear story mode, and you have the next generation of *Need for Speed.* Though you could basically go anywhere and do anything in *Most Wanted*, your main goal was to work your way up the "Black List," a group of 15 notorious street racers. Beat them all and you win back your ride, and maybe even the hot chick. Who says crime doesn't pay?



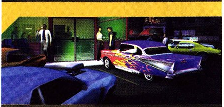
NEED FOR SPEED CARBON

For the next generation of *NFS*, EA is working to add yet another racing style to the series—touge racing, or drifting. Adding downhill and uphill racing to the street racing action won't be an easy task, but we figure if anyone's up to it, the talented folks at EA Black Box are. | *Greg Sewart*



SPINNING OFF

The *Need for Speed* series also saw two rally titles released in 1997 and 1999. *Need for Speed: V-Rally* and *V-Rally 2* weren't true-blue *NFS* games but rather European imports that had been licensed by Electronic Arts and had the *NFS* logo slapped on them in the hopes of earning a few more sales. *V-Rally 2* was actually released on the Dreamcast as well, though on that system it was called *Test Drive V-Rally.*



INFORMATION SUPERSPEEDWAY

EA was planning on releasing a *Need for Speed* game in 2001. Dubbed *Motor City Online*, it was to be a perpetually online game that appealed to car junkies by allowing players to trick out their vehicles, join virtual car clubs, take part in various race types, and so on, all online.

The game was eventually released sans the *Need for Speed* name and was a colossal failure. The servers weren't even online for two years, due to a lack of interest in the product.

GOOD, BAD, UGLY

The best—and the worst—of racing games

WITH THE LATEST *NEED FOR SPEED* ON THIS MONTH'S DISC, WE THOUGHT WE'D OFFER A PRIMER OF THE TOP RACING GAMES TO LOOK FOR ON THE PS2 AND PSP...AND THE TOP ONES TO AVOID.

GOOD

PS2

GRAN TURISMO 4

Publisher: Sony CEA

OPM SCORE: 10/10

Gripe all you want about the lack of online play, car damage, or major improvements from the previous version; *GT4* is still the peak of sim racing on any Sony platform.

BURNOUT REVENGE

Publisher: EA Games

OPM SCORE: 10/10

Waaaay at the other end of the spectrum from *GT4* is this pinnacle of over-the-top arcade racing. With eyeball-fusing speed and more gameplay modes than you can shake a crumpled bumper at, *Burnout Revenge* is pure adrenaline.

MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB EDITION

Publisher: Rockstar

OPM SCORE: 8/10

You can't talk about PS2 racers without mentioning the free-roaming model that made its debut on the system. And sorry, *Need for Speed Underground*, but when it comes right down to it, we'd rather spend our time with *Midnight Club*.

RIDGE RACER V

Publisher: Namco

OPM SCORE: 9/10

No PlayStation launch is complete without a *Riiiidge Racer*, and the PS2 was no exception. While not as over-the-top as *Burnout*, *RR5* nails the pure, arcade-style drift racing.

MOTOGP3

Publisher: Namco

OPM SCORE: 9/10

With *Tourist Trophy* proving so disappointing, there's really only one other franchise motorcycle fans can turn to for a simulation fix. *MotoGP3* is, as far as we're concerned, the pinnacle of the series.

PSP

BURNOUT LEGENDS

Publisher: EA Games

OPM SCORE: 9/10

There are plenty of racing games on the PSP—it seemed at first that there was little else—but for sheer playability, content, and longevity, *Burnout Legends* can't be beat. It's so fast as to appear almost unplayable...but somehow it totally works.

RIDGE RACER

Publisher: Namco

OPM SCORE: 9/10

The oodles of tracks make this one feel like a *Ridge Racer* history lesson and, while it's not as fast as *Burnout*, the no-frills drift racing just plays right.

WIPEOUT PURE

Publisher: Sony CEA

OPM SCORE: 8/10

While the track selection could be better, *Pure*'s innovative track design and frenzied speed make it a worthy successor to the venerable series.

BAD

PS2

ENTHUSIA PROFESSIONAL RACING

Publisher: Konami

OPM SCORE: 5/10

Konami's attempt to go head-to-head with *Gran Turismo* falls flat; the realistic driving engine and interesting graphical effects can't make up for the bizarrely stat-heavy racing and unforgiving "Enthu points" system.

FLATOUT

Publisher: Empire Interactive

OPM SCORE: 5/10

Though the deep damage model and ridiculous rag-doll, driver-tossing minigames offer something new, the floaty controls and fundamentally uninspired gameplay make for a wholly mediocre experience.

NASCAR 2001

Publisher: EA Sports

OPM SCORE: 5/10

It isn't bad enough that the glitchy graphics make *NASCAR 2001* look like a PS1 game; to add insult to injury, the game features almost none of the under-the-hood tweaking that makes NASCAR an interesting sport. Not good.

PSP

ATV OFFROAD FURY: BLAZIN' TRAILS

Publisher: Sony CEA

OPM SCORE: 6/10

When the PSP launched, *Blazin' Trails* earned more points than it should have for simply being a solid port of a fairly broad PS2 game. But the painfully twitchy controls caused the game to be quickly surpassed by, well, just about every other PSP racer.

UGLY

PS2

DRIVING EMOTION TYPE-S

Publisher: Square EA

OPM SCORE: 5/10

As one of the first PS2 racers, *Type-S* sure did look pretty. Painstakingly recreated interiors and some nifty graphical effects gave the game a beautiful shine. Unfortunately, it didn't outshine the excruciatingly ugly (to the point of being virtually unusable) controls.

AUTO MODELLISTA

Publisher: Capcom

OPM SCORE: 5/10

A cel-shaded online racing game? With licensed cars and loads of customization? *Such* a cool, unusual idea. And then we played it. The online hiccups would perhaps have been more bearable if the offline game didn't equally suck.

YOUR FIRST TIME

ELISHA CUTHBERT

SHE LOVES HER PLAYSTATION ALMOST AS MUCH AS WE LOVE HER.

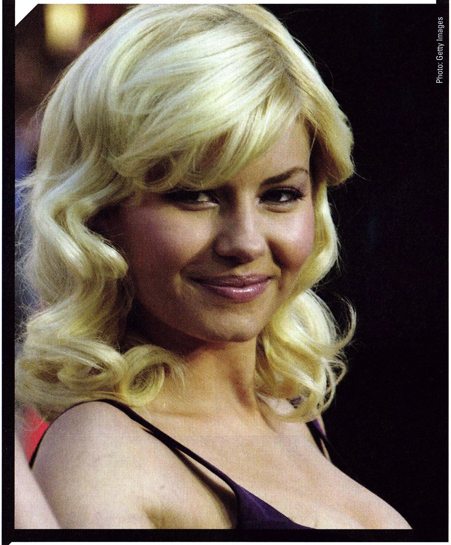
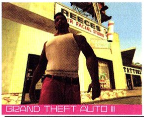
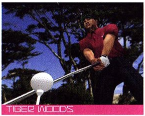


Photo: Getty Images



GRAND THEFT AUTO III

SPLINTER CELL



TIGER WOODS

Elisha Cuthbert is intelligent, funny, kind, easy to talk to—and, oh, just a little easy on the eyes. But while we wanted to save her when she was on *24* and wished she were our neighbor when we saw *The Girl Next Door*, it wasn't until she admitted, "I'm a huge PlayStation fan" that we truly fell in love. And wondered how strict restraining orders get.

"I'd been playing videogames for a while when [my family] moved up to a PlayStation. I started with games like *Donkey Kong Country* and all that stuff, but when we got our PlayStation, I became a huge PlayStation fan. I used to play a lot of sports games, like a lot of hockey and NFL. Then, when we moved up the PlayStation 2, I got into racing games and things like *Grand Theft Auto III*. I went through a really big phase with that one. I'm really into games that are like movies. Games like *Splinter Cell*. I like the idea of a game that has a story. So I'm not really big into sports games as much anymore, except for maybe *Tiger Woods*. Unfortunately, I haven't been playing much lately. I've been really busy. The last game I played was the *24* game when we did the junket for it." | *Paul Semel*

PS1-DERLAND

SPEAKING UP FOR THE NOT-SO-SILENT MINORITY

BY JEREMY PARISH

When he's not trying to reclaim his vanished youth with obsolete games, Jeremy works as 1UP.com's features editor and charming mascot. Check out his blog at toastyfrog.1UP.com.

Last month, I lamented the dire state of voice acting in PlayStation games. And there was much to lament; the 32-bit era was not kind to those with a taste for quality drama. The cumbersome vocal performances of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Resident Evil,* and countless other games raked across our ears and souls like fiery fingernails across a chalkboard.

You'd think someone somewhere along the way between development kit and Wal-Mart store shelves would have stopped to say, "You know, we've spent nearly a million bucks creating, translating, publishing, distributing, and advertising this game. Maybe we should reflect that investment in the final mix by *not* making the dialogue sound like it was recorded during a raw reading in an ESL classroom."

Clearly, you think differently than large corporations.

Fortunately, there were a few brave souls struggling against the tide of mediocrity to show us the way. Crystal Dynamics, for one. Its PlayStation debut, *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain*, turned as many heads with its dramatically intoned dialogue as it did with its blood-soaked, vampire-as-antihero gameplay. A handful of other games—all notably developed in the West—also bucked the trend with decent-to-good voice work, including Core Design's *Tomb Raider*.

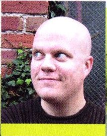
But Japan-based publishers were slow to catch on. Oddly enough, the first Eastern companies to jump aboard the quality bandwagon had also been some of the worst offenders. Capcom, for instance, had made children cry with *Mega Man 8*'s English dub (wherein the hero spoke in a hyper-castrato pitch, kindly Dr. Light had Elmer Fudd as a voice coach, and evil Bass—named for the musical term—was called "Bass," as in the fish), while *Resident Evil* had brought a generation to tears of laughter with howlers like "the master of unlocking" and "You were almost a Jill sandwich!"

> GAMING'S TAKEN TINY STEPS ON ITS ROAD TO MATURITY.

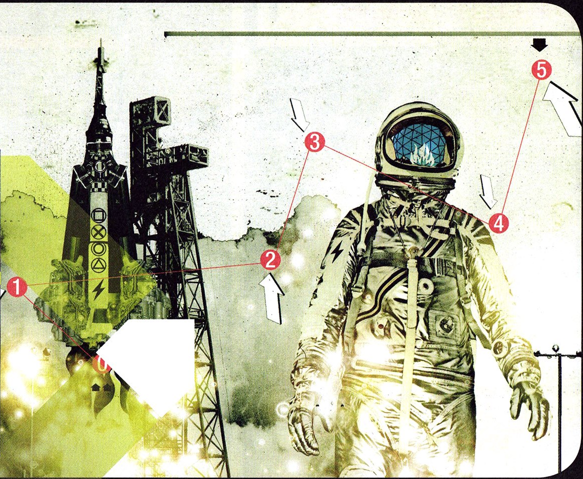
Yet 1998's anime-like *Mega Man Legends* featured a fantastic dub, alternately serious and over-the-top as it fit the characters and situations. Its sequels were every bit as good—even if Mega Man suddenly sounded like a *Sailor Moon* character in the second game—and Capcom continues to produce above-average English vocal tracks today. Most recently, *Dead Rising* impressed reviewers with its tense, gripping performances while amusing gaming's literati by mocking the company's own checkered past...courtesy of a mall restaurant called Jill's Sandwiches.

Dead Rising's excellence should hardly be a surprise, though, since the English voice work was reportedly directed by one Kris Zimmerman, who earned the respect of attentive gamers when she graced *Metal Gear Solid* with one of the best American dubs ever recorded. And good thing, too; with hours and hours of dialogue in *MGS*, an audio track reminiscent of Konami's earlier creation *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* would have been an excruciating exercise in abject suffering.

Of course, as with every fledging medium, gaming's taken tiny baby steps (punctuated by horrible missteps) on its road to maturity. So consider each bit of wooden dialogue and tin-eared proclamation a tiny arc in the learning curve that led gaming to where it is today. Game vocals certainly aren't perfect...but at least you don't find yourself throwing your speakers out the window, either. |



JOE RYBICKI remembers well when the first PS2s showed up at the office, direct from Japan. He also remembers how abysmal the launch lineup was. Ah, good times. Share your stories of launch by sending an e-mail to opm@ziffdavis.com.



IN MY DAY...

NO NEED TO ABORT, THE COUNTDOWN STARTS

Every day brings us closer to the launch of the PS3. It's barely two months away as of this writing. And yet many fans have observed that the fountain of information is still flowing at a desultory trickle. Where's the official launch lineup? Where's the flood of games? Why isn't the hype train chugging along at full speed?

There's a really simple, three-word answer: simultaneous worldwide launch.

Yes, I know Sony recently revealed that the European release is being pushed back to next year. But that doesn't really change things; up until that decision, the company has been operating as though the system would in fact be hitting store shelves everywhere in the world virtually simultaneously. The point is that no one gets the system before the U.S. does.

Think about that for a moment. Think how that changes things for us here in the North American market. When the PS1 and PS2 launched, we had months to salivate over import games. With the system already rolling overseas, there was a constant stream of new information as new games and peripherals were released.

And think how that changes things for Sony. Before, the company was able to focus its attention on one market at a time and put all its muscle behind each regional launch before moving on to the next one. This time around, even with Europe out of the picture, the company has to orchestrate production, distribution, and sales in two wildly different markets simultaneously.

But most importantly, think how that changes things for developers. Most game designers, as of this writing, have only just received their final PS3 development kits. But when the PS2 launched, devs had over half a year longer to fiddle with the final hardware. Six months—especially the six months right before release—is an eternity in game-development time.

All these factors build upon each other, pushing the whole state of the PS3 into a tizzy of uncertainty and last-minute locking down of details. So what does this mean looking forward? Well, for one thing, expect the PS3 to have a slower start in North America than the PS2 did. I'm not saying the stock won't sell out; I suspect it will, as there are more than half a million people in the U.S. and Japan who would buy a PS3 even if it didn't have a single game. But I do think that we're likely to see a much larger wave of games next spring.

Does this mean Sony is doomed? I doubt it. Ultimately, the way a system launches doesn't matter one whit. It has been, is, and will continue to be all about the games. As long as the PS3 is host to a few key titles you can't get anywhere else—or, failing that, superior versions of games you *can* get elsewhere, like *Oblivion*—it will thrive.

Of course, that doesn't change the fact that the next few months should prove very interesting indeed. |

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